

# Death, Dying, and the Afterlife

## Lessons from World Cultures

### Course Guidebook

Professor Mark Berkson  
Hamline University



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# DEATH, DYING, AND THE AFTERLIFE

## LESSONS FROM WORLD CULTURES

**T**he inescapability of death and our knowledge of our mortality impact every aspect of our lives. We human beings die and *know* we are going to die. Death is not only an event that lies in our futures; it is the horizon against which we live our lives. We live in continuous awareness that we will have to experience the death of loved ones, and we recognize that because we are beings who love, we are beings who grieve. We live in continuous awareness of our own inevitable death. The choices that we make are shaped in countless ways by how we think about death, what we believe happens after death, and by what death—and life—ultimately mean. So thinking about death is an essential element of the reflective human life, and it brings us face-to-face with questions of meaning in the face of finitude and loss. In what ways might death threaten the meaningfulness of our lives? And in what ways might death make a meaningful life possible? How have human beings in different cultures and historical periods come to terms with death?

This course is a multidisciplinary exploration of a complex topic. We will see why the perspectives of numerous different disciplines are necessary to more fully understand the role that death plays in our lives. We will see that, in order to understand death in all of its dimensions, we need to bring in the disciplinary lenses of theology, philosophy, history, psychology, anthropology, sociology, literature, and many other areas of inquiry. We will encounter great thinkers reflecting many different approaches to the problem of death: religious thinkers such as Confucius, the Buddha, and St. Paul; philosophers from Epicurus to Camus; psychologists and psychiatrists such as Sigmund Freud and Elizabeth Kubler-Ross; writers and poets such as Dylan Thomas, Jorge Luis Borges, Simone de Beauvoir, C. S. Lewis, Joan Didion; and many others.

The course is organized around five big questions:

- 1 How do human beings think and feel about death? This section is about our thoughts, representations, and attitudes about death. The focus is on philosophical and psychological concerns. We look at the ways we *think* about death—and the ways we avoid thinking about death—and the ways we *feel* about death, along with the impact that the fear of death has. We look closely at the phenomenon of death denial, and the implications of denying death. We examine the various ways people put a value on death—as good, bad, or nothing at all.
- 2 How do human beings experience death? In this section, we move from our thoughts about death to our experiences of it. Experiences of death can be divided into two kinds: the death of others and our own dying. In this section we explore the ways that people in different cultures and traditions deal with grief and mourning, carry out death rituals, and prepare for their own deaths. Here we bring in the perspectives of anthropology and sociology, along with psychology.
- 3 How do the world's religious traditions understand and approach death (and the afterlife)? In this section of the course, we will look at the understandings of, and rituals surrounding, death in the world's major religious traditions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. We will bring in the approaches of theology and comparative religious thought to explore the questions that arise. How do members of these traditions explain death? How does death fit into their larger worldviews? How do they conceptualize continued existence after death? We will look at different understandings of what happens after death, and different ways death is overcome, accepted, or transcended in these traditions.
- 4 When is it justified to take life? The fact that the issues surrounding the taking of life are debated with such intensity is a testament to the value that we put on life. Many of us would describe life as sacred or precious. This is why whenever we decide to take life, we should engage in deep reflection on our motivations, and on the consequences, implications, and morality of our actions. The issue of

taking life can be understood in two different ways: taking one's own life and taking the life of other living beings. We will think about both, bringing in approaches not only from philosophy and theology, but also politics and law. We look at complex and controversial issues surrounding the questions of when we are justified in taking our own lives—suicide and euthanasia—and when we are justified in taking the lives of other human beings in the cases of war and capital punishment. We also look at the question of when we are justified in killing non-human animal beings.

- 5 How important is death to our understanding of what it means to be human? In our final section, we begin by looking at what science has learned about the dying process (and possibly what lies beyond death) through the study of near-death experiences. We also examine the millennia-old quest to overcome death by exploring human efforts, throughout history and across cultures, to attain radical longevity or immortality. We look at whether or not radical longevity or immortality is possible, and, if so, whether it is desirable. What would the actual consequences of radical life extension, or immortality, be? If we were immortal, would we still be human? This section shows how the approaches of the natural sciences must be brought into dialogue with the humanities and social sciences.

Entering into conversations about these questions and topics with thinkers, texts, and traditions representing a wide range of the human experience can be a transformative experience. Not only do we gain insights into what it means to be human and learn about how human beings have come to terms with death, but we also are led to the kind of existential reflection that can change how we live and die.

# DEATH'S PLACE IN OUR LIVES

All of us yearn to understand death, and how to make sense of it in the context of our lives. This lecture introduces our approach to this course, which will be an exploration of how the greatest thinkers and texts from the world's different religious and philosophical traditions have understood death; what fields such as theology, biology, anthropology, literature, and psychology have to say on the subject; and how people from different cultures have understood and faced death throughout history.

## THINKING ABOUT DEATH

- ◇ Mark Speece and Sandor Brent, who have researched the subject of how children understand death, write that death is not a “single, unidimensional concept but is rather made up of several relatively distinct subconcepts.”
  - The first of these subconcepts is *universality*: All living things die.
  - The second is *irreversibility*: A dead person does not come back to life.
  - The third aspect is *nonfunctionality*: Death brings about the end of all life functions, of all physical and mental activity.
  - Fourth is *causality*: Death is brought about either by internal, biological causes (such as organ failure) or external causes (such as trauma).
  - Finally, there is the *existential* element: Each person understands, “I am going to die.”



- ◇ As adults, we carry all of these ideas in our heads on some level when we think about death. We aren't born with them, however. At some point in childhood, just about all of us confront the idea of death, but most children don't grasp all its aspects at once.
- ◇ Generally speaking, by the ages of seven and older, children begin to develop what Speece and Brent call the "mature understanding of death," which encompasses all five characteristics. A study in 1996 concluded that, "it is not until about 10 years of age that healthy children *achieve* an understanding that death is irreversible, permanent, and inevitable."

## HOW CONCEPTS OF DEATH DEVELOP

- ◇ Children's thoughts on death are shaped by a wide range of factors. Among them are culture, religion, personal experience, and media, particularly literature. Think of how many fairy tales, folk songs, and nursery rhymes deal with death-related themes in some way. Examples include "The Three Little Pigs," "Little Red Riding Hood," "Snow White," and "Hansel and Gretel."



- ◇ Prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most people lived in extended families and most people died at home, neither of which is true in contemporary America. Children in previous centuries saw people die at home regularly. These were not only grandparents, but siblings. In 1900, children succumbed much more often to a wide range of illnesses that are now preventable or treatable. Today, thanks to medical advances, fewer than 2 percent of deaths in the United States each year occur in children under 15.
- ◇ Elizabeth Lamers, who wrote, “Children, Death, and Fairy Tales,” shows that, over time, adults wanted to protect children more from the harsh realities of violence and death, and so diluted such themes. Nowadays, Lamers observes, “Children’s cartoons consistently present a distorted view of mortality to children, even fostering the especially erroneous conclusion that death is somehow ‘reversible.’”
- ◇ Think about cartoons like *Looney Tunes*, in which Wile E. Coyote dies numerous deaths only to pop up fully restored for the next scene. It is true that children are exposed to a great deal of death in television and movies, but Lamers points out that the people who die in movies are usually the “bad guys” who get what’s coming to them.

## ADULTS AND DEATH

- ◇ Just as children in many developed countries come into contact with death much more rarely today, so too has the exposure of death to adults changed dramatically. Consider the common experience of people with death during the Middle Ages in Europe, where plagues decimated populations throughout the period, and cholera epidemics claimed tens of millions of lives in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. If untreated, cholera can kill within hours.
- ◇ Today, in countries in North America and Europe, many people are living into their 70s, 80s, 90s, and beyond, so we have come to associate death primarily with old age. Moreover, a greater percentage of people are dying in their later years from chronic illnesses like cancer, diseases that can progress slowly. One result of this has been a greater emphasis on *managed death*: planning a dying experience, trying to create the most graceful possible exit.



- ◇ Newspapers, cable TV, shows and websites regularly bring us stories and images of plane crashes, car accidents, wars, epidemics, murders, and suicides. Yet our exposure to death is usually impersonal.
  - Most American and European families don't care for their dead anymore. They don't lovingly bathe and dress the corpse; they don't dig the graves themselves.
  - Bodies are immediately covered up, put in drawers, and often preserved and made up to look as alive as possible. On this level, we can avoid a direct confrontation with the reality of death and deny it in ways our ancestors could not.

## PERSONIFYING DEATH

- ◇ Another way of looking at how we think about death is to consider the images and metaphors we use when picturing or talking about it. The personification of death, something that still sometimes occurs in movies and cartoons, was already popular in ancient civilizations. In ancient Greece, for example, death was represented as Thanatos, son of night and darkness, and twin brother of the god of sleep, Hypnos.

- ◇ Thanatos is described by the poet Hesiod as “pitiless ... whomsoever of men he has once seized he holds fast.” But in later periods, Thanatos was seen not as pitiless, but as one who can help someone leave this world peacefully.
- ◇ The notion of an angel of death is found in the Hebrew Bible, Christianity, and Islam. Other religious traditions, too, feature deities or other beings who are responsible for the realm of death, from Yama, the lord of death in Hinduism, to La Santa Muerte in Mexico, a saint portrayed as a feminine skeleton who can provide protection to her devotees and also can give them safe passage to the afterworld.
- ◇ Probably the most immediately recognizable figure of death today, at least in Western societies, is that of a hooded figure in a black cloak, often with a skeletal body and generally carrying a scythe. Some argue that this figure became widespread during the Black Death, when people died in such numbers that a fearsome killer must have seemed to be stalking the land.
- ◇ What does personifying death do for us? Certainly, it doesn’t make the prospect of dying more pleasant; there is nothing friendly about a skeleton in a black cloak. But it does help us think in concrete terms about a subject that our minds struggle to envision: our own negation.

## TALKING ABOUT DEATH

- ◇ This struggle is clear in the way we  *speak*  of death as well. We tend to use metaphor. Which metaphors we choose, however, can both reflect and shape our attitudes toward death.
- ◇ One immediately apparent divide is between those metaphors that emphasize the finality of death—to  *snuff out* , or to  *annihilate* —and those that characterize it as a transition or gateway to another state— *passed on* .
- ◇ Because of the unsettling nature of the topic of death, many people use euphemisms so as not to have to mention death directly. For example, we liken death to an endless sleep. We speak of people being  *laid to rest*  or  *resting in peace* .



- ◇ While such gentle phrases may seem innocent enough, they tend to mask what is actually a social taboo on the use of the word *death*. It's as if we're afraid that using it might somehow bring death about.

## LAUGHING ABOUT DEATH

- ◇ Humor is yet another way that we try to come to terms with death—and one of our best defenses. People whose jobs involve being surrounded with death—emergency room doctors and homicide detectives, for example—often use humor to defuse the pain and the tensions that they deal with every day.

- ◇ Nurse Vera Robinson wrote a book entitled *Humor and the Health Professions*, in which she acknowledged that humor among medical professionals is “often raunchy, sensual, scatological, aggressive and ‘gallows,’ that is macabre, black, gross.” The reason, she argued, is “because we are dealing with illness, blood, guts, trauma and death!”
- ◇ Linda Henman, who studied American veterans who had faced the prospect of death every day as prisoners of war in Vietnam, wrote that they “often found humor to be an effective coping mechanism, a way of fighting back and taking control.”
- ◇ But even those of us with less dramatic lives would like to manage the prospect of our own demise, and we’re happy to have the help of comedians. In the film *Monty Python’s Meaning of Life*, Death is an unexpected guest at a dinner party. The host, who fails to recognize this ominous figure, stands in the doorway and calls to his wife, “It’s a Mr. Death or something. He’s come about the reaping.”

## PERSONAL DEATH

- ◇ So what does one think about when they think about their *own* death? If one believes in some kind of afterlife, then perhaps they contemplate what that might be like.
- ◇ But what about those who believe that death is simply the end? What about people who believe that there is nothing after death? For the purposes of this reflection, let’s imagine that this is the case.
- ◇ As many thinkers have pointed out, it is impossible for us to experience, or even imagine, being dead. We can certainly imagine dying, but if we believe that we cease to exist at death, then it is not possible for us to imagine nonexistence.

- ◇ Since we cannot imagine being dead, what are we doing when we think about being dead? Well, we are thinking about life without us, we are thinking about *not* being in relation to the people we love, *not* being engaged in the projects we care about, *not* being able to experience the joys and pleasures of being alive. We are, in other words, meditating on loss, but in doing so, we are reflecting on all of the things that matter to us in our lives. And that offers us an opportunity.
- ◇ Thinking about death is not simply the price we have to pay for a fuller, more honest understanding of our lives. Reflecting on death can have a remarkably *positive* effect on one's life. Many religious traditions teach that a form of regular death meditation or reflection can deepen one's appreciation for life.
- ◇ We should also remember that we would not have this precious life were it not for death. Death is necessary for new life to be possible. Our lives are constituted and sustained by death. We see this most obviously in the food that we eat, but we can also see it in terms of the very elements that make up our bodies and breath.
- ◇ Physics and astronomy professor Ray Jayawardhana tells us: "The iron in our blood, the calcium in our bones and the oxygen we breathe are the physical remains—ashes if you will—of stars that lived and died long ago." We owe everything to death. When we reflect on how transient life is, we more deeply appreciate what a gift it is, and how we should try to be as fully alive in each moment as possible.

## SUGGESTED READING

Fingarette, *Death: Philosophical Soundings*.

Lamers, "Children, Death, and Fairy Tales."

Speece and Brent, "Children's Understandings of Death."

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 What factors influence the way a particular society or culture imagines or thinks about death?
- 2 What are the most accurate or useful metaphors to use when thinking about death?
- 3 What impact does reflecting on death have on the way you live?



# DEFINING DEATH

In order to explore the subject of death properly, we must answer an important question: What *is* death? When, precisely, does a living being become a dead being? It seems like the answer should be obvious, but the more closely we look at the question, the more difficult a straightforward answer seems. In a sense, the question exists on multiple levels. At one level, this is a biological question, and answering it involves establishing criteria for when life is no longer present in a being. At other levels, there are religious, philosophical, cultural, legal, and political dimensions to the question.

## A GRUESOME CASE

- ◇ The 1952 case of Leonard and Gladys Gugel highlights the practical importance of defining death. The Gugels were a married couple who were in a car together when they were hit by a locomotive at a railroad crossing. Both died.
- ◇ It was important for the court to determine who died first, since if Gladys survived Leonard, then his estate would pass first into her hands and then, after she died, to her father as administrator of the estate. But if she died first, there would be a different process of inheritance.
- ◇ According to the record of the court of appeals, the witness “found Mrs. Gugel decapitated, her head lying about ten feet from her body, which was actively bleeding from near her neck and blood was gushing from her body in spurts.” Mr. Gugel, on the other hand, had already lost his pulse.
- ◇ At the time, doctors were using a cardiovascular definition of death. The court ruled that she survived her husband, who lost his pulse earlier. Clearly, the court’s definition of death had real, practical significance for Mr. and Mrs. Gugel’s heirs.

## ORGAN TRANSPLANTS

- ◇ Another practical reason to define death precisely is in connection with organ transplants. Over 6,500 people who need transplants die each year before they are able to receive one.
- ◇ The definition of death can have a dramatic effect on this number. Why? Because, from the time that transplantation technology was first developed, surgeons have generally employed what's known as the *dead donor rule*, which holds that procuring organs should never itself be a cause of a person's death. Organ removal must wait until the donor is unequivocally dead, which has often meant until there is no heartbeat, respiration, or blood pressure.
- ◇ The problem, according to Joshua Mezrich and Joseph Scalea, doctors who specialize in transplantation surgery, is that in many cases today, the protocol results in organs being unusable. In most cases, life support is withdrawn from a patient while the organ-recovery team stands by. But if the patient takes more than a couple hours to die, the organs become unsuitable due to decreased blood flow.



- ◇ For this reason, some doctors and ethicists are now proposing the notion of *imminent death* for the purposes of organ transplantation. The criteria are as follows:
  - 1 The person has a terminal disease and requires extraordinary means to remain alive.
  - 2 The person believes that he or she no longer has an acceptable quality of life.
  - 3 The person knows that stopping the life-prolonging measures will result in death in a short period of time.
- ◇ Some doctors propose that in such cases of imminent death, the dying person should be able to choose to donate his or her organs under general anesthesia.

## FOUR DEFINITIONS OF DEATH

- ◇ Death has been defined in a number of different ways throughout history. Philosopher Louis Pojman sees four primary approaches. The first is the way death was defined within many religious traditions in the pre-modern period: Death is the departure of the soul from the body.
  - In many Western formulations, there is a basic dualism underlying this notion. People are understood as consisting of a material body that dies and a non-material soul or spirit that lives on eternally.
  - There are at least two practical problems with defining death using the concept of a soul. First, different theologians disagree about what it is (and some traditions deny it exists).
  - Second, in order to make a claim with scientific or legal significance, the soul would have to be something observable or measurable. But nobody has found any empirical evidence of its presence or absence.

- ◇ Due to such problems, scientists came to prefer different approaches. The second definition of death on our list, which focuses on organ function, is closer to the one that the court used in the *Gugel* case: a cardiopulmonary definition that considers death as occurring when the heart and lungs cease to function.
  - Unlike the soul-based definition, this one has the virtue of being measurable. The cessation of the heartbeat, blood circulation, and breathing is often indicated with the term *clinical death*. Doctors still frequently use this approach when declaring a patient dead.
  - The cardiopulmonary approach has its problems, though. For one, we now have technologies that allow for resuscitation: machines like defibrillators, chemicals like epinephrine, and techniques such as cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) for reviving a human being with our own hands and breath. This means that many people who have been clinically dead have been brought back to life, which contradicts the irreversibility criterion of death.
  - Furthermore, we now have machines that can do the work of the heart and lungs. Because of this remarkable technological achievement, people whose brains no longer function and who have no conscious existence—those in a persistent vegetative state with no chance of recovery—can avoid death, by some definitions, for years. The question becomes to what extent they are still alive.
- ◇ The deficiencies of the cardiopulmonary definition have prompted many people to argue for a third approach: *whole brain death*. When the brain is dead, the argument goes, the person is dead, even if the heart and lungs can be kept functioning. A committee at Harvard University in 1968 established four criteria which, if measured at least 24 hours apart, establish death:
  - 1 Lack of receptivity and response to external stimuli
  - 2 Absence of spontaneous muscular movement and breathing
  - 3 Absence of observable reflexes, including brain and spinal reflexes

4 Absence of brain activity, as signified by a flat electroencephalogram (EEG).

- Since these criteria include elements of the autonomic nervous system that occur in the brain stem, they would indicate whole brain death.

◇ Some scientists and medical ethicists want to take yet another step and argue that it should not take whole brain death for a person to be declared dead. This brings us to our fourth approach: neocortical death.

- In the brain, the neocortex is the seat of many of the elements we identify with our sense of self and what it means to be a conscious subject in the world. These include consciousness or awareness, sense perception, language, memory, and thought.
- If this part of the brain dies, one will no longer be an experiencing subject. This leads ethicist Karen Gervais to conclude, “It is loss of consciousness and not loss of biological functioning that should determine when human life is over. ... Neocortically dead individuals are dead.”
- Some people, however, dispute this way of defining death, arguing that as long as some parts of the body are alive, the person is alive. For instance, other parts of the brain can survive if the neocortex dies.
- There have been famous cases of people who tragically experienced neocortical brain death but continued to exist in a vegetative state for many years. One of the most famous is Karen Ann Quinlan, who became a symbol in the debate over the definition of death and over the “right to die.”
- Quinlan entered a persistent vegetative state at age 21 after consuming pills and alcohol. She was kept breathing with a ventilator. After a legal clash, her parents won the right to discontinue treatment.

- Remarkably, after she was removed from the ventilator, she continued to breathe on her own. She remained in a persistent vegetative state for nearly a decade before dying of pneumonia. The autopsy revealed exactly what we would expect given what we know about the brain: a damaged cerebrum (which contains the neocortex) but an intact brain stem (which controls respiration).

## DEFINING LIFE

- ◇ Focused as all these debates and dilemmas are on the definition of death, they also inevitably involve its flipside: What is the definition of life? If we can define what it means for a being to be alive, then presumably we'll have a definition of death as the absence of that. Unfortunately, the definition of life, too, is remarkably elusive.
- ◇ Some scholars define life, in its most basic forms, with a focus on self-sustaining biological processes. Being alive, they argue, means that functional activity is occurring that involves a number of capacities: growth, response to stimuli, movement, homeostasis, and reproduction, for example.
  - Whenever we have a list of criteria, though, we have the problem of what to do when some are present and others are not. We end up with interesting marginal cases, like viruses. Viruses replicate themselves using the cells of other beings but are inert and cannot reproduce without a host.
- ◇ Unable to derive a clear definition of life, we find ourselves groping for the essential elements of life as *we* experience it. What does it mean for a person to be alive? We can ask that question two different ways depending on our emphasis:
  - 1 What does it mean for a person to be *alive*?
  - 2 What does it mean for a *person* to be alive?

- ◇ Philosopher Jeff McMahan points out that there is a difference between saying that “a body, or the organism, is dead” and “a person is dead.” A person has the capacity for consciousness. In this view, there is a difference between the death of the person, which means neocortical death, and the death of the body, which means biological or organismic death.

## CULTURAL DEFINITIONS

- ◇ Biological definitions are only one part of a larger picture. Death is also defined culturally. To give an example: A traditional practice among certain tribes in Borneo, Indonesia, illustrates that biological and cultural death can be very different things. After a person stops functioning (in a way that most of us would label as death), the body is placed in a temporary shelter, perhaps in a back room in the house, or in a miniature wooden structure on a raised platform near the house or in the forest.
  - This state can stretch out for months as preparations for the funeral are made.
  - Family members will sometimes bring food to the individual.
  - While the body is vulnerable, the soul is said to wander around confused. The soul of the person can be unhappy and angry, and for this reason is considered potentially dangerous.
  - When the burial finally occurs, the person is said to cross over into the land of the dead. Only the members of the community can determine when the person is truly dead.
- ◇ Notice how very different the approach of these tribes is from the one used in Western societies. In most cases in the West, ultimately, it is the doctor in charge of the patient’s care who will make the decision about death and formally pronounce the patient dead (which will then allow for a certificate of death to be issued).

## SUGGESTED READING

Gervais, *Redefining Death*.

McMahan, “The Metaphysics of Brain Death.”

Pojman, “What is Death? The Crisis of Criteria.”

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 What criteria should be used to develop a definition of death?
- 2 Which definition of death is the most useful?
- 3 What real-world consequences are there for adopting a particular definition of death?
- 4 Is death a particular moment or a process?



# DEATH, ILLUSION, AND MEANING

If death has the final word, how do we live a happy, meaningful life? In the face of mortality, what does it all mean? The contemplation of our finitude can shake our foundations and call into question our sense of meaning. Later in this course, we'll discuss many different visions of the afterlife. In this lecture, we're going to explore how it's possible to find meaning in life even if you believe that this short life is all we have.

## THE DENIAL OF DEATH

- ◇ The existential challenge that death poses is the subject of a Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Denial of Death*, by cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker. Becker argued that one of the primary shapers of human belief and conduct is our awareness of death.
- ◇ Becker believes that this knowledge is too much for us. As a species, in ways that are different but often shared across cultures, we deny death.
- ◇ There are a number of possible forms of death denial. One is a general form in which people don't want to deal with the subject at all, don't even want to think about it. This form of death denial becomes impossible to sustain in times of war, epidemic, or famine.
- ◇ Another form of death denial can exist even during war and epidemic. One can continue to believe that the bullet or virus will always kill the other person.

- ◇ A third form, which denies the finality or absoluteness of death by positing some form of personal survival following it, likewise has existed from ancient times. The vast majority of the human population believes in some form of post-death existence.
- ◇ Our problem with death, Becker posits, arises from the fact that we are a combination of the biological (the fact that we are animals) and the symbolic (the mental realm). Think of how we can be imagining the cosmos, thinking about complex ideas, creating beautiful art, and then suddenly fall seriously ill, laid low by a microscopic being.
- ◇ Becker argues that we cannot live with this understanding of the world. The primary thing we fear when we fear death is our *insignificance*. So, Becker says, we create other levels of reality in which to live. We create illusions. He does not use the term *illusions* in a negative or critical way. He just means a world of “humanly created meaning, a new reality that we can live, dramatize, nourish ourselves in.”
- ◇ All of the things we do to give our lives meanings are human creations: our worlds of politics, the arts, religion, philosophy and so on. At the same time, there is a dark side to our deep-seated need for significance. It is to this that we now turn.



## ESCAPE FROM EVIL

- ◇ In his follow-up book, *Escape from Evil*, Becker argues that the evil that we do to each other is a response to threats to our meaning systems. For example, if we find purpose and comfort in knowing that a group of which we are a part will live on after we're gone, then any person or group who threatens the validity, significance, or truth of our group or cause will shake the foundations on which we have built our system of meaning.
- ◇ Others don't even have to explicitly threaten our meaning system. The very existence of meaning systems different from our own (with a different sense of what matters, what is true, what brings us immortality) can pose a threat to us.
- ◇ When we know people who gain meaning and fulfillment from being part of different communities and traditions, it calls into question the legitimacy of ours. After all, if they're right, then perhaps we're wrong.
- ◇ To combat this threat, we often seek to convert or destroy those who are part of a different group. Becker's main thesis in *Escape from Evil* is this: "Man's natural and inevitable urge to deny mortality and achieve a heroic self-image are the root causes of human evil."

## TERROR MANAGEMENT

- ◇ A group of social psychologists—Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski—wanted to test Becker's hypotheses. They began a series of experiments designed to test what happens when people are reminded that they are going to die, and then have to make choices while their own mortality occupies their minds, even if unconsciously.
- ◇ Each study had two groups: one that was reminded that they are going to die, one that was not. The death reminder might take the form of a simple question, such as "Briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you."

- ◇ Numerous studies have been done to analyze the effects that these death reminders have on people's attitudes and behavior, giving rise to what is known as *terror management theory*.
- ◇ In a famous early experiment, municipal court judges were asked to set bonds for prostitutes. Some of the judges were given mortality reminders prior to the determination, others were not. The judges who were reminded of death set significantly higher bond amounts than those who were not reminded. The authors of the study believed that being reminded of mortality made the judges more severely punish those who violate the laws of the system with which the judges identify.
- ◇ In another study, Christians were asked to indicate the attitudes they had toward a group of people whose profiles were presented to them. Those who were reminded of their mortality had more favorable views of other Christians, and more unfavorable views toward Jews. Other studies have confirmed this—when people are reminded of their mortality, they have more positive views toward people of the same religion and more negative views of those of a different religion.
- ◇ In fact, some studies revealed that people given mortality reminders not only felt more negatively toward those perceived as “other,” but were also willing to inflict actual pain on them. (To keep the study within acceptable ethical boundaries, this was measured by the amount of hot sauce people put in the food of others.)
- ◇ The researchers conclude, “These findings suggest that terror management may play a significant role in in-group favoritism and prejudice.” This is particularly true for religion because religious worldviews explicitly address issues of death, immortality, afterlife, and meaning.
- ◇ If subtle reminders of our mortality, which intensify our underlying fear of death, cause potentially negative attitudes and behaviors, what happens when we are made to think more deeply about our deaths?
- ◇ It turns out that there is a paradoxical result: Thinking even more deeply about death can mitigate some of the problems caused by our fear of



death, and perhaps even deepen the connection we feel with those who are different. Sustained death meditation plays a significant role in many religious traditions.

## NECESSARY FICTIONS

- ◇ Another important question arises about those societal systems of meaning that are so psychologically important to us: If they can be causes of evil, what attitude should we take toward them?
- ◇ For Becker, our meaning systems, like art or literature, can all be seen as beautiful, necessary fictions that can act to reveal the truth rather than conceal or flee from it.
- ◇ The key thing to keep in mind is that one gains the many benefits from participation in meaning systems only if one can, to some degree, forget their constructed natures. Sports serve as an example.

- All of the goods that sports make possible—the bond of teammates, the intense drama, the development of skills and character—can only be achieved if one partially forgets the constructed nature of the game.
  - At the same time, if we take the game too seriously, there is the possibility of evil. Consider the Colombian soccer goalie who was killed by a distraught fan after his mistake led to the loss of a key game.
  - We need to immerse ourselves in the game enough to get joy and meaning from it, but never so completely that we lose sight of the fact that it's just something we create.
- ◇ Becker extends this approach to our entire lives. We throw ourselves into the meaning systems we create—political and economic systems, religious and philosophical traditions and so on—and partially forget their constructed natures.
  - ◇ Becker describes the best kind of illusion for our well-being: “A lived, compelling illusion that does not lie about life, death and reality; one honest enough to follow its own commandments: I mean, not to kill, not to take the lives of others to justify itself.” We should embrace the illusions that make our lives better, but not be threatened by the illusions that others construct to give their lives meaning—as long as these are ethical, life-affirming illusions.

## RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

- ◇ Let's look at an ancient Confucian thinker from China named Xunzi, who approached his religious and cultural tradition in the same way that Becker recommends.
- ◇ Xunzi lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries B.C.E., and despite the millennia that separate us from him, he has a view which, in many ways, is quite modern. He rejects supernaturalism and does not express any belief in

an afterlife. And yet he vigorously defends the importance of Confucian rituals, which he says must be interpreted not literally, but symbolically.

- ◇ He believes that his tradition, while created by past human beings (sages for whom he has great reverence), gives meaning and beauty to his life and the lives of others, and brings harmonious order to society. But he also believes that religion, if taken literally and not seen as a human creation, can cause great harm.
- ◇ Xunzi speaks explicitly of the symbolic function of religion, ritual, and music, often analyzing and interpreting the symbols. What is significant for Xunzi is not just the production or use of symbols, but the cultivation of the symbolic attitude, the “as if” or “as though.” Here’s one example of how Xunzi shifts the interpretation of a ritual from a literal, supernatural one to one that is symbolic:

When conducting a sacrifice ... one speaks to the invocator *as though* the spirit of the dead were really going to partake of the sacrifice. One takes up each of the offerings and presents them *as though* the spirit were really going to taste them. ... When the guests leave, the sacrificer ... weeps *as though* the spirit had really departed along with them. How full of grief it is, how reverent! One serves the dead *as though* they were living, the departed *as though* present, giving body to the bodiless and thus fulfilling the proper form of ceremony.

- ◇ Xunzi sees the Confucian death rituals as having the power to craft the most painful, disturbing, and frightening aspects of life—death and loss—into something beautiful.
- ◇ For Xunzi and Becker, religion can be seen like art or fiction in the sense that an awareness of its humanly created status produces not disillusionment but admiration or even reverence. Both thinkers, who reflected deeply about how to come to terms with death without denying it and without the prospect of immortality, would respond to the question of the “meaning of life” by changing the question. If one searches for a meaning *of* life, one will search in vain, for all meaning is created and experienced *in* life.

## SUGGESTED READING

Becker, *Denial of Death*.

———, *Escape from Evil*.

Lifton, *The Broken Connection*.

Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, *Worm at the Core*.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 In what way does our society deny death? What are the consequences of death denial and terror of death?
- 2 If death is the complete end of our existence, is our meaning system threatened?
- 3 Do all human beings need to live in some kind of illusion (in Becker's sense of the word)? If so, what attitudes should we have toward our illusions?



# IS IT RATIONAL TO FEAR DEATH?

Most of us would admit that, at least in some way, we fear death. But what if we're making a mistake—a reasoning error? What if our fear of death is based on a misconception about death that, if corrected, would eliminate our fear? And what if that misconception were the belief that death is bad? In this lecture, we're going to address the question of whether death really *is* bad for the person who dies—and the related question of whether it is rational to fear death.

## EPICURUS

- ◇ For the purposes of this lecture, we are going to treat death as the absolute end, setting aside the question of personal immortality.
- ◇ Upon initial thought, it seems as if death is one of the worst things that can happen to us. But philosophers from the times of the ancient Greeks and Romans have argued that death cannot be considered bad for the person who is dead.
- ◇ The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus, who lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries B.C.E., expresses this position. Epicurus was the founder of the Epicurean school, which has been misunderstood as a form of hedonism, often of the culinary variety. For Epicurus, the highest state is *Ataraxia*, which is akin to equanimity or tranquility. There is an inner kind of



freedom that results from the elimination of the intense mental and emotional ups and downs we experience.

- ◇ What is one of the major sources of mental agitation? Ernest Becker, along with many other thinkers, would answer: the fear of death. So if Epicurus can get rid of our fear of death, like a doctor giving us the right prescription to get rid of an infection, we will live a more peaceful, enjoyable life. This is philosophy as therapy.
- ◇ Epicurus is a materialist, so he believes that all good and bad consist of sense experience. Death, he argues, is the privation of sense experience. Since we're not here to experience death, it can't be a bad experience for us (it isn't *any* kind of experience), so it can't be bad for us in any sense.

## LUCRETIUS AND ROSENBAUM

- ◇ Lucretius, the Roman philosopher-poet who was born over a century and a half after Epicurus died, carried on the Epicurean tradition. Lucretius goes a step further, however. He asks us to imagine the infinite stretch of time that preceded our birth, pointing out that we (or at least most of us) are not bothered by our non-existence during that vast period. Well, Lucretius argues, post-death non-existence is the same as pre-birth non-existence.
- ◇ Some contemporary philosophers use the tools of analytic philosophy to push similar ideas. Stephen Rosenbaum, for example, puts the entire argument as a set of propositions, a simplified version of which appears here:
  - 1 A state of affairs is bad for a person only if that person can experience it at some time.
  - 2 A person can experience a state of affairs only if it begins before their death.
  - 3 A person's being dead is *not* a state of affairs that they can experience (since it doesn't occur before their death).
  - 4 Therefore, a person's being dead is not bad for them.

## NAGEL

- ◇ The contemporary philosopher Thomas Nagel is a famous critic of the Epicurean position that Rosenbaum supports. In his influential essay entitled, simply, “Death,” he argues that, contrary to what Epicurus, Lucretius, and Rosenbaum say, death is, in fact, bad for the person who is dead, which would make it perfectly rational to fear it.
- ◇ The essence of Nagel’s argument is this: Death is bad because of what it deprives us of. Nagel writes that in addition to all of the particular goods that we can enjoy in life, it is good simply to be alive (unless you are one whose suffering is so severe and untreatable that death is preferable).
- ◇ One way to explain the debate between the Epicureans and Nagel is by examining two possible meanings of the word *bad*. On one definition, something is bad if it is experienced as bad, if it causes the person to suffer in some way. On this definition, the Epicurean argument seems to stand: Death cannot be experienced and therefore cannot be bad.
- ◇ However, there is another, more indirect approach to defining *bad*. We begin not by defining *bad*, but by defining *good*. This way, we first get a sense for the goods that are available to us as human beings, the enjoyment of which makes life worthwhile. We then define anything that prevents the enjoyment of these goods as bad. Since death deprives us of all possible goods, it can be considered bad for the person who dies.
- ◇ Epicureans would counter that it is true that death deprives us of the goods of life, but it is also true that the deceased will not be around to experience that deprivation. How does Nagel address this objection? He begins by claiming that it is a version of the old adage, “What you don’t know (or experience) can’t hurt you.” Then he asks: Is this really true?
- ◇ Nagel and others use interesting examples to get us to reflect on this question. For example, if a person were betrayed by a spouse or a friend and never found out about it, would the betrayal still be bad for him? If we know what matters to him, can we say that this is what he would want for

himself? Thinking in this way, we could conclude that being betrayed is bad for him even though he never finds out about it.

- ◇ Let's now undertake still another thought experiment. Let us say that Susan writes a book, for she has an idea that she wants to communicate to the world, something she values very deeply. After completing the book, she suffers a quick, painless death. In one case, after she dies, the manuscript is destroyed in a fire and nobody ever reads it. In the other, it is published, influences many people, and has a positive impact on the world.
- ◇ The philosopher J. David Velleman insightfully points out that well-being over a period of time is not merely the sum of momentary well-being over that period. In order to make judgments about someone's well-being over time, we do not just understand that period as a succession of moments, but as having an overarching structure which helps us make sense of development in that period—in other words, a *narrative*.
- ◇ Only from this perspective can we ask if someone has had a successful year, decade, or life; the Epicurean momentary model does not allow for such a question.
- ◇ Another philosopher, Joel Kupperman, illustrates this by pointing out that a “lucky run of preference-satisfactions” may not add up to a “good life.” There cannot be a notion of “a good life” without some kind of narrative frame.
- ◇ Nagel gives a powerful example to back up this claim. Imagine an intelligent person who suffers a brain injury “that reduces him to the mental condition of a contented infant.” By Rosenbaum's definition of badness, how could this situation be seen as bad for the person? After all, he does not experience the badness. As long as he is kept fed and comfortable, he is content.
- ◇ But if, we consider, as Nagel suggests, “the person he was, and the person he *could* be now, then his reduction to this state ... constitutes a perfectly intelligible catastrophe.”

- ◇ If we return now to the example of Susan's book, we can see that the meaning and value of events borrow from past and future events; there is a kind of retrospective and prospective significance derived from the events' location within a narrative structure. Susan's joy in writing the book came from her expectation that many would read it.
- ◇ Her death and the loss of the manuscript can only be understood through reference to her hopes and values, for these are constitutive of her very identity. From this perspective, her death and the loss of the manuscript are both tragedies for Susan.

## ASYMMETRY

- ◇ We can now return to the *asymmetry problem*. If we are not disturbed by contemplating our pre-birth non-existence, then why should we be disturbed by our post-death non-existence? From an Epicurean position, this would be irrational.
- ◇ But Nagel's position shows us that it makes sense to think of post-death non-existence as something "bad," something to legitimately fear, even as we don't feel the same about pre-death non-existence.
- ◇ The difference lies in the fact that during the time before birth, the person did not yet exist. Once we are born and come into consciousness, we enjoy all of the goods that life has to offer. In other words, now we have a lot to lose.
- ◇ There is another way in which we can fear death and consider it an evil. It is closely related to, but distinct from, Nagel's deprivation model. In this case, what concerns us is not the deprivation of any particular goods of life, but rather non-existence.
- ◇ When we use the word *fear*, we usually think that it has a particular object: a being, situation, or event that makes us afraid. This means that fear can be addressed by dealing with the object. If you're scared of a snake, and someone removes the snake, you're no longer afraid.

- ◇ But non-existence is not a thing about which we can be afraid in this way. So we might want to use a different word when our attitude toward non-existence is addressed, perhaps *dread*. Unlike the case of fear, which has a specific object, this feeling cannot be relieved by removing anything.
- ◇ We cannot avoid our ultimate fate, so its reality accompanies us throughout our life, as the horizon against which our life unfolds. Our mind blinks against the concept of our non-existence.
- ◇ As you reflect on both the Epicurean arguments and those of Nagel's school of thought, consider the following possibility: Both sides are right. Each brings a different lens through which to see the layered concept of death. Each captures an aspect of how death impacts human life.

## SUGGESTED READING

Feldman, *Confrontations with the Reaper*.

Kagan, *Death*.

Nagel, "Death."

Rosenbaum, "How to Be Dead and Not Care."

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 Do you ultimately agree more with Nagel or Rosenbaum? Are these two views mutually exclusive, or can one hold both at the same time?
- 2 Can something be bad for a person if they never experience it?
- 3 Is it rational to fear death?

# UNDERSTANDING AND COPING WITH GRIEF

When people experience grief, many wonder whether their feelings and behavior are normal—for instance, whether they have cried too much or too little, whether they're getting back to work too soon or staying away too long, and whether they're spending too much time alone or have become too dependent on the company of others. As we'll see, so-called normal grieving can involve a wide range of behaviors. In this lecture, we're going to consider the nature and functions of grief, several of the many forms it takes, and some ways of coping with it.

## DEFINING GRIEF

- ◇ What exactly *is* grief? The most general definition is that grief is the reaction to loss. We are going to focus in this discussion on bereavement—grief over the loss of a loved one who has died—but grief can also result from other kinds of losses: the loss of a limb or an ability, a job, or a home. Grief also quite often accompanies the end of a relationship.
- ◇ One of the most common emotions that accompanies loss is sadness. But grief can include a great variety of other powerful emotions and responses, including disbelief, lack of motivation, and intense anger. The loss of a loved one can also bring about fear, numbness, guilt, loneliness, despair, and regret.
- ◇ Although the most common behavior among bereaved people is crying, many people also experience loss of appetite, sleep disruptions, and disturbing dreams. Others suffer confusion, inability to concentrate, loss of interest in things they previously loved, a decrease in sociability, and even hallucinations—such as seeing, hearing, or feeling the presence of the deceased.

- ◇ The more sudden and unexpected the death is, the more intense the grief may be, and the harder it may be to accept the loss. The specific cause of death also affects grief: The homicide or suicide of a young person can produce particularly intense forms of grief, as opposed to the death of an elderly person from a prolonged illness. Of course, the closeness of one's relationship to the deceased will affect the nature of grief as well.

## INTERPRETATIONS OF GRIEF

- ◇ Psychologist John Archer has surveyed the various understandings of grief, and puts them into three categories. The first two essentially characterize grief as a problem: something maladaptive that must be treated so that it can be resolved in a timely way. One of these two categories classifies grief as a psychiatric disorder of some kind, and the other considers it as a kind of disease that leads to a decline in health.
- ◇ And yet there is a very different way to understand grief (our third category): as a perfectly natural response to loss. It can be seen as necessary, even healthy.
- ◇ Grieving responses are seen in a wide range of social mammals, including elephants; gorillas and chimpanzees; dolphins and sea lions; dogs, cats, and wolves. A variety of birds exhibit grieving as well. Those who emphasize the naturalness of grief, and the way it reflects our love for the deceased, often resist the medicalization of grief evident in the first two categories.
- ◇ But grief puts a being at a significant survival disadvantage, given how dysfunctional and vulnerable it makes one. How can we have evolved to react in such a seemingly non-adaptive way?

## EVOLUTION OF GRIEF

- ◇ In evolutionary theory, there are two basic ways of explaining the persistence of a trait over time. In one case, the trait persists because it is adaptive. It





The term *spandrels* comes from the architectural word for the spaces surrounding arches; they are by-products of the design.

helps those who possess it live longer and reproduce more successfully. But other traits may persist not because they are directly adaptive but because they are by-products of other, adaptive traits. Paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould labeled these *spandrels*.

- ◇ Psychiatrists John Bowlby and Colin Parkes, who wrote extensively on grief, both hold a version of this view. In essence, the theory is that a reaction of psychological distress to the separation from a loved one—particularly if a child gets separated from a parent—is highly adaptive, as it leads the two to seek to be reunited. Such separation responses, then, help maintain connection, bonding, and social solidarity.
- ◇ Crying, for instance, alerts the parents to the location and the needs of a child. Separation responses are necessary for the maintenance of close relationships. However, that response continues to operate even when reunion is impossible because of death. Grief, on this explanation, is the price we pay for being as attached as we are to each other.

## GRIEF'S INDIVIDUALITY

- ◇ Grief seems to take unique contours in each lived experience. The author C. S. Lewis chronicled his own experience of grief in his book, *A Grief Observed*. His wife, Joy Davidman, died of cancer three years after they were married. Initially, he struggled simply to come to grips with losing her. He wrote, “She died. She is dead. Is the word so difficult to learn?”
- ◇ Over time, the grief became less overwhelming, but there were periods of deep despair, when he could not see past the world that exists in the shadow of grief. He wrote, “I not only live each endless day in grief, but live each day thinking about living each day in grief.”
- ◇ Lewis was a widely admired lay theologian. What was most unsettling for many readers of *A Grief Observed* were his agonized doubts about God. Ultimately, Lewis’s faith was sustained, but his raw honesty in portraying his anger toward and doubts about God may strike a chord with people who feel guilty about having such thoughts.
- ◇ Writer Joan Didion’s book on the loss of her husband is called *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Its title reveals one of the major themes of the book: the fact that we can simultaneously know a loved one is dead, and yet refuse to believe it at another level, and act as if it isn’t true or that it might be reversible.
- ◇ Another theme in Didion’s writing is how remarkably physical grief is. Didion writes, “Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life.”

## CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

- ◇ Intense and deeply felt as grief often is, differences in how people around the world deal with loss suggest that our responses may be based not only on our shared biology, but also on our varying cultural norms.
- ◇ Anthropologists Paul Rosenblatt, Patricia Walsh and Douglas Jackson looked at studies of grief and mourning in 73 societies, and made an

interesting discovery with regard to crying. They found that crying was rated as present for bereaved persons in 72 of the 73 societies.

- ◇ The 73<sup>rd</sup> society is Bali, which has a culture strongly influenced by Hindu and Buddhist beliefs, values, and practices. The authors observe, “The Balinese have religious beliefs that encourage people to be calm and undisturbed.”

Ngaben, a Balinese funeral ritual



- ◇ Another case that challenges our assumptions about grief can be found in Alto de Cruzeiro in Brazil, and also elsewhere in South America. The work of anthropologists like Nancy Scheper-Hughes has shown that the death of an infant is treated there not as tragic, but as a blessing. The dead infant is seen as an angel baby, an innocent who will never know suffering or pain.

## EMOTIONS ABOUT DEATH

- ◇ Sigmund Freud found that there are powerful, ambivalent attitudes and emotions that arise when a loved one dies. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud argued that unless grief has an appropriate outlet, the mourner risks melancholia, a form of what we would today call *depression*.
- ◇ The loss must be “worked through.” For Freud, the crucial “working through” process is described as a labor in which the testing of reality occurs and the “ego succeeds in freeing its libido [or attachment] from the lost object.” This process is carried out “bit by bit,” having the “nature of a compromise.”
- ◇ If this does not occur, there are a variety of pathologies that might emerge in the aftermath of the death of a loved one. One is *delayed grief* or *morbid grief reaction syndrome*, where the bereaved might put off mourning for up to years.



- ◇ Another is *pathological mourning* or *prolonged grief disorder*. This occurs when the grieving person is unable to let go of the deceased, attempting to preserve as exactly as possible the objects or residence of the deceased and to continue, without alteration, the behavior and activities that the mourner carried out before the death.

## OTHER OUTLOOKS

- ◇ A more positive outlook on the grieving process can be found in the work of grief counselor Gordon Lang, who believed that, although grief is unquestionably painful, going through it is what enables healing to occur. He wrote, “There’s healing in the hurting.” Lang also found that helping others aids in the healing process.
- ◇ Elizabeth Kubler-Ross wrote a groundbreaking 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*. Through her interviews and observations, she developed the theory of the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.
- ◇ Kubler-Ross acknowledged that not every person goes through all five stages, that the stages don’t always go in this order, and that there may be some alternation among them. Nevertheless, she believed that people generally experience most of the stages in basically that order.
- ◇ Today, the notion that there are orderly stages of grief has been widely accepted, and many people think of the progression of stages that Kubler-Ross identified as normative. Rather than following universal patterns, psychologist George Bonanno found that the way people grieve can generally be divided into three categories:
  - 1 Chronic grief reactions: People are simply overwhelmed by the pain of loss, and find it all but impossible to return to their daily lives.
  - 2 Gradual recovery: The bereaved suffer acutely at first, but then slowly pick up the pieces and begin reintegrating themselves back into the world.

- 3 Resilient responses: People manage to regain their equilibrium and move on. They don't necessarily find a state of closure, and even the most resilient seem to hold onto at least a bit of wistful sadness. But they are able to keep on living their lives and loving those around them.

## HELPING GRIEF

- ◇ Psychologists and others who do grief work believe that, in spite of the variations in the way people grieve, some general practices can help alleviate the pain of their grief. One of the most important is captured in the story of Kisa Gotami and the Buddha. In that story, a grieving woman is taught the universality of grief after the Buddha sends her from house to household, all of which have been visited by death. The lesson: Share your grief with others.
- ◇ Grief counselors often advise the bereaved to avoid completely isolating themselves from others. While those in grief often need, and benefit from, time to themselves, prolonged isolation from others can lead to complicated and more harmful forms of grief.
- ◇ In keeping with the idea of sharing grief, there are now grief and loss centers in the United States, some specifically tailored to the needs of children and their families, that provide counseling, peer support, conversation groups, and activities designed to help people heal.
- ◇ A similar philosophy led to the creation of The Shared Grief Project, a website that features short videos of celebrities who lost parents or siblings at a young age.
- ◇ Learning to live with loss is one of our fundamental human tasks. The death of a loved one has an impact on us that never goes away. A deep wound might no longer be open and bleeding, but it will leave a scar. We are all partially defined by our scars, each one a testament to pain that has altered us forever.

## SUGGESTED READING

Bonanno, *The Other Side of Sadness*.

Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*.

Parkes, *Love and Loss*.

Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 What are healthy and unhealthy ways of grieving? When does grief become a problem?
- 2 To what extent is grief a human universal, a part of our nature, and to what extent is it culturally constructed?
- 3 What functions (e.g., evolutionary, psychological, social) does grief serve?
- 4 If a person experiences the loss of a loved one without tears and emotional pain, does this indicate something unhealthy, or a state of mind to be admired?
- 5 What are the best ways to help a grieving person?



# DEATH RITUALS AND THE CORPSE

In this lecture, we're going to look at how the treatment of the body of the deceased in death rituals serves to meet both the needs of the surviving loved ones and the perceived needs of the dead. A person's death is typically acknowledged through a multistep ritual process that conceptually moves the person from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead, however that is conceived. At the same time, the bereaved make their own transition, as they come to terms with their loss, and accept the cutting of certain ties.

## rites of passage

- ◇ The recognition of death is generally a complicated gradual process. A person's physical death is, of course, a biological fact. It does not, however, necessarily mark the end of that person's social or cultural life.
- ◇ The anthropologist Arnold van Gennep argued that rites of passage generally involve a three-step process, both for the dead and the living: separation, transition, and incorporation. While these steps are seen in virtually all death rituals, van Gennep found that the emphasis differs across cultures.
- ◇ For instance, cultures in which the persistence of the soul in the afterlife is a central belief emphasize incorporation of the deceased into the realm of the dead as the rituals' main purpose. In cultures without such a belief, the death rituals focus on establishing the separation of the deceased from the realm of the living and the need for loved ones to cut ties with the dead.
- ◇ In either case, though, the transitional, or liminal, state has an unstable character for both the deceased and the mourners, and is fraught with ambiguity and possibility.



## THE CORPSE

- ◇ From the earliest years of our species, we have thought of the corpse as far more than just a body that must be taken care of. It has great significance for us, but we also have complicated feelings about it, because it's a paradox: an absent presence.
- ◇ Thomas Lynch, an undertaker and writer, tells a story of an Episcopalian deacon who was nearly decked by the swift slap of a mother who was grieving the loss of her teenage daughter. The girl had died of leukemia, and the deacon had tried to console the woman as she looked at her daughter's body, saying, "It's OK, that's not her, it's just a shell." The incensed woman replied, "I'll tell you when *it's* 'just a shell.' From now and until I tell you otherwise, *she's* my daughter."
- ◇ One of the most significant ways in which death rituals differ among faith traditions is in the method they use for disposing of the corpse. Consider that societies are often judged on how they treat their most vulnerable members. The dead, who can no longer care for themselves, are perhaps our most vulnerable of all.
- ◇ The last act we can perform for them is to care for their bodies and give them a proper farewell, and the means we choose for doing that are a profound statement about what they mean to us, and of who and what we are.

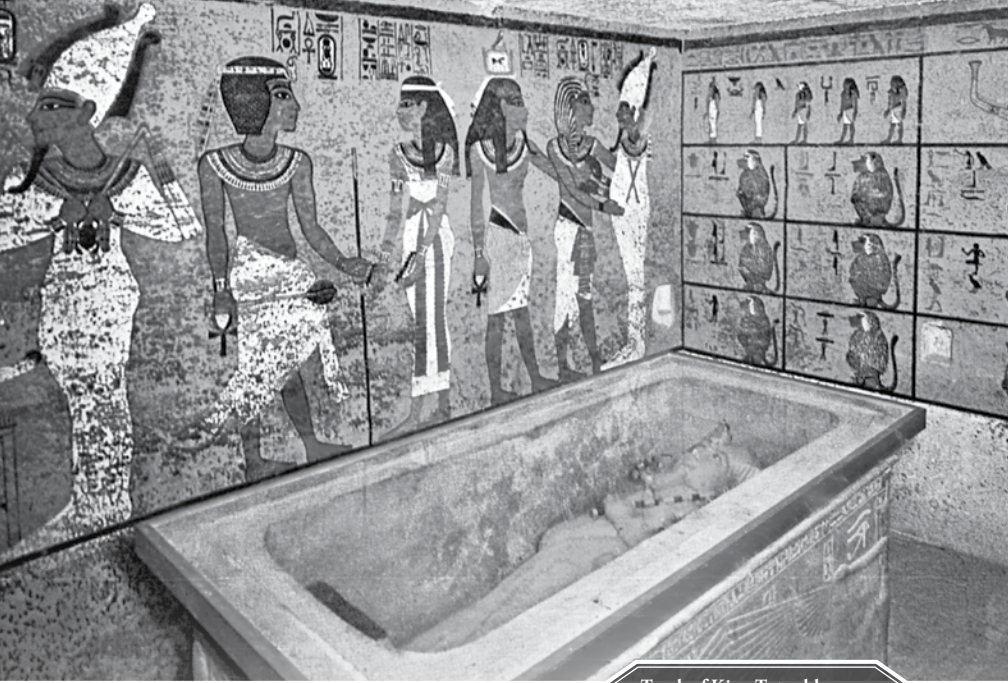
## BURIAL

- ◇ Burial is the oldest method of corpse disposal for which evidence still exists. We have been ritually burying our dead from our earliest days on earth; the *we* in this sentence includes not only *Homo sapiens* but our Neanderthal relatives, whose burial sites have been found in northern Iraq, Israel, and France.
- ◇ Burial has been the preferred method of the Abrahamic religions throughout history. It was seen as the way to return the body to the "dust" out of which it was originally created by God as described in the Bible's book of Genesis.

- ◇ In the Middle Ages in Europe, bodies were often buried inside the local church, although this could create a problem with odors emanating from beneath the floor. Over time, the practice of burying bodies in cemeteries near the church became popular, and the notion developed that there should be a demarcation between the places occupied by the living and those of the dead.
- ◇ Although the practice is not common in the United States, many cultures perform two burial rituals, each of which serves a different purpose. The body is buried in a first burial and then the remains are disinterred and moved for reburial some time later, often after many years. One can see these second burials as a final end to the liminal state, whereby the deceased finally arrives at the land of the dead or ancestors.
- ◇ The first burial, sometimes called the *wet burial*, involves the body of flesh, the body that gives us our unique appearance. The second burial, or *dry burial*, involves the exhuming and reburial of the bones. If flesh represents individuality, the bones can be seen as representing universality, as the dead ultimately join the collectivity of the ancestors.
- ◇ Another form of burial is water burial, or *burial by sea*—a ritual that has long been practiced by mariners. The U.S. Navy’s method is to slide the shrouded corpse off of the side of the ship. In some forms of Viking burials, the corpse was placed in a ship surrounded by grave goods, all of which was covered by earth. The ship was then lit on fire and set adrift, meaning that the burial involved earth, water and fire.

## PRESERVATION

- ◇ Some cultures, most notably that of the ancient Egyptians, have sought to preserve the corpse even while burying or entombing it. The Egyptians’ goal was not, however, to protect the body for the sake of the living, but to aid the deceased on his or her journey in the afterlife.



Tomb of King Tutankhamun

- ◇ The Egyptians learned that the essence of corpse preservation is dehydration. The bacteria that break down the body thrive on moisture, so if the body is to be preserved, the blood and other fluids, as well as the organs, must be removed. The Egyptians put the organs into jars for safekeeping until they could be reunited with the rest of the body in the afterlife.
- ◇ Egyptians believed, as people in other cultures have, that thinking occurs in the heart, which meant that the dead person would need the heart to navigate to the afterlife. Amulets were often placed over the heart, and one that was commonly seen is that of a dung beetle or scarab. The symbolism seems to be that as dung beetles turn waste into food and use it to nourish larvae (new life), so the dead would also be given new life.



## CREMATION

- ◇ Cremation is another ancient form of dealing with a corpse. Cremation involves exposing a corpse to extreme heat—1400–1800 degrees Fahrenheit for 2–2.5 hours—thus reducing it to minerals and bones. In modern cremations, these are then put through a *cremulator* to reduce them to a granular state. Ashes normally include tiny hard fragments of bone pieces.
- ◇ Many Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe that to burn a human body is a form of desecration. Those who believe in resurrection maintain that the body should be kept as intact as possible in anticipation of its restoration to life. Early Christians saw burial as following the example of Jesus' burial, and anticipated that, as in his case, resurrection would follow.
- ◇ The first modern crematoria in Europe were built in England, Germany, and Italy in the 1870s. While cremation faced resistance everywhere, opposition was particularly strong in Catholic countries. In England, there was an attempt—ultimately unsuccessful—to prosecute the man who carried out the first cremation.
- ◇ Today, cremation is chosen by the majority of people in the U.K., where it is subsidized, and in Denmark, Sweden, Australia, New Zealand, and

Canada. This is especially true for people who live in urban areas, where land for cemeteries is increasingly scarce.

- ◇ Opposition persists, however, in Catholic countries such as Italy and Poland, where the cremation rate today is still below 10 percent. By way of contrast, in many parts of East and South Asia, cremation is the most popular way to dispose of a body.

## EXCARNATION

- ◇ Still another way to dispose of a corpse is simply to leave it exposed outside, to be consumed by animals or the elements. As this leads to the removal of the flesh, with only bones remaining, it is referred to as *excarnation*.
- ◇ While disturbing to some who might see it as a type of abandonment of the body, excarnation has much to recommend it from an ecological standpoint. It leaves a much lighter environmental footprint than most forms of corpse disposal in the West, as it neither uses up energy like cremation, nor does it add contaminating elements to the earth, as most conventional burials do.
- ◇ In Tibet, the practice of exposing a corpse is known as “sky burial.” The body is eaten by vultures, who gather at the spots where the rituals take place. The consumption of the body is not seen as desecration, but as returning the deceased to the natural cycle of all things.
- ◇ This form of corpse disposal is also a practical choice in a place where the ground is frozen for much of the year, making burial difficult, and where trees are not abundant, making it hard to find wood for cremation fires.

## CONSUMPTION

- ◇ History contains examples of peoples who made a habit of eating the dead of their own tribe. Let us try to understand the thoughts and feelings that motivated this practice by exploring one tribe that engaged in it until the

mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The tribe is the Wari, an indigenous population of about 1,500 living in the western Brazilian rainforest near the Bolivian border.

- ◇ An anthropologist named Beth Conklin studied the Wari; she published an account of her findings in 1995. She writes, “Until the 1960s, they disposed of nearly all their dead by consuming substantial amounts of corpses’ body substances.” This was *endocannibalism*—the consumption of flesh from someone’s own group, as opposed to *exocannibalism*, the consumption of an outsider’s flesh.
- ◇ The Wari said that consuming the flesh of the deceased helped them to deal with their loss. In Wari death rituals, there were powerful vocal expressions of grief, what Conklin calls “a ceaseless, high-pitched keening that sen[t] a haunting mantra of collective grief reverberating off the surrounding forest.”
- ◇ The Wari said that the most emotionally difficult part of the ritual was the dismemberment of the body, during which the vocal expressions of grief reached their height. Dismemberment was an expression of the severing of social attachments.
- ◇ Body parts that were not or could not be eaten—hair, nails, genitals and entrails—were burned. The dead person’s personal belongings were also destroyed, as they would evoke painful memories.
- ◇ After the body was dismembered, eating was considered the most respectful way to dispose of what remained. It was not done in the aggressive style that often accompanies the consuming of enemy flesh. Rather, Waris avoided touching the flesh with their hands, putting it on small toothpick-like sticks, crying while they ate.
- ◇ In Wari culture, people *wanted* their dead bodies to be eaten, as the “idea of being incorporated into fellow tribesmembers’ bodies apparently had considerably more appeal than the alternative of being left to rot in the ground alone.”

- ◇ The Wari practiced this until the 1960s. They were ultimately pressured by missionaries and government officials to abandon it, however, and took to burying their dead in the forest instead.

## SUGGESTED READING

Hoy, *Do Funerals Matter?*

Metcalf and Huntington, *Celebrations of Death*.

Roach, "Stiff."

Robben, *Death, Mourning and Burial*.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 In what ways are the religious beliefs in a culture related to the way they treat the corpse in funeral rituals?
- 2 What do you want done with your body after you die and why?
- 3 With what functions and roles is a corpse associated with in death rituals?
- 4 Why was there so much resistance to cremation in many parts of Europe and America when the practice was first introduced?

# AMERICAN DEATH RITUALS

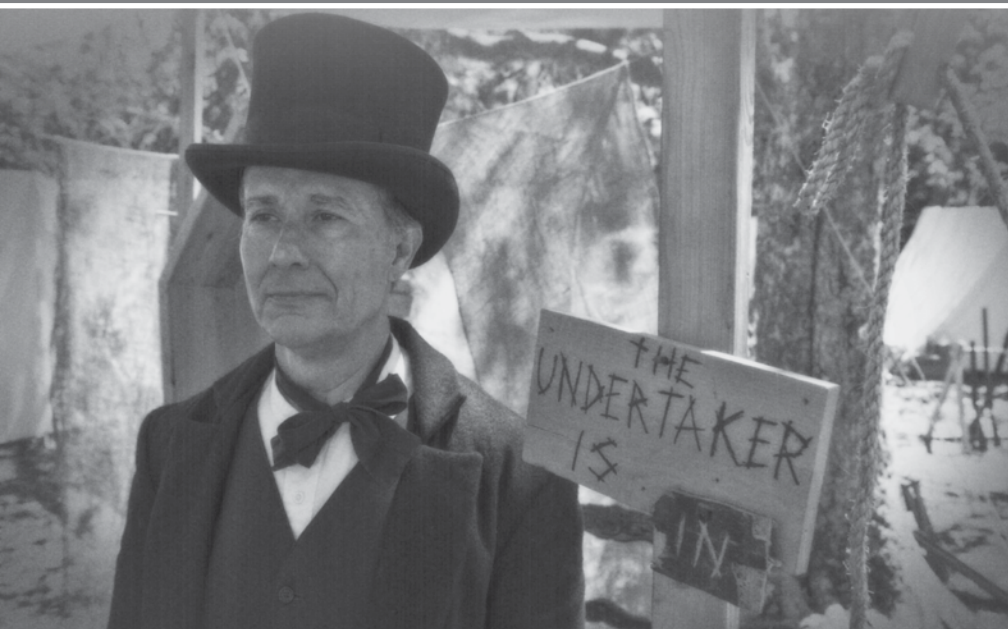
In this lecture, we will take a close look at the death practices of the United States. In the relatively short history of the United States, there have been numerous changes in how Americans say goodbye to their dead. Death rituals in the United States display a remarkable diversity. Modern American funerals range from minimalist to extravagant, traditional to highly innovative and idiosyncratic. This state of affairs took centuries to develop, and is the product of, among other things, America's multi-ethnic culture, its economic system, its unique history, and its tradition of social reform.

## AMERICAN APPROACHES TO DEATH

- ◇ The significant majority of the American population has always been Christian, so while there has been some syncretism and influence from other traditions—particularly Judaism and Islam—Christian death rituals have been, and remain, the most widespread.
- ◇ According to professor Kathleen Garces-Foley and theologian Justin Holcomb, the American approach to funerals can be roughly divided into three periods: the traditional, the modern, and the post-modern.
- ◇ As an example of a traditional death ritual, historian David Stannard's description of a Puritan funeral is helpful: a simple affair where family members wash and care for the body, make it available for viewing at home or a church, and bury the body within a few days.
- ◇ By contrast, the modern Christian American way of death—which is also shared by Americans of many other traditions—has been characterized by professionalization and medicalization.



- ◇ The process has been delegated to a funeral industry. The dramatic change came in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of America's greatest cataclysm: the American Civil War.
- ◇ The Civil War is estimated to have killed some 750,000 soldiers. Horrific as the emotional toll on the country was, death on such a scale also presented a practical challenge: What to do with all the corpses? The families of soldiers who died on the battlefield wanted their sons sent home.
- ◇ A Union doctor named Thomas Holmes developed a form of chemical embalming using a hand pump and arsenic to preserve a body. If family members requested the body of their son, it would be embalmed and sent to them. The profession of "freelance embalmer" soon arose, and practitioners would set up tents near battlefields to ply their trade.
- ◇ As the practice of embalming spread, it began to shape the funeral industry. Embalming required special facilities, and therefore gave rise to the modern funeral home. The funeral home soon became a place that would take care of all the needs of the bereaved.



- ◇ The undertaker, whose job previously had been focused largely on preparing bodies for burial, became a funeral director. The funeral director took on the role of walking a person through the logistical—and emotional—challenges of the funerary process.
- ◇ Jews and Muslims typically avoided embalming, as traditional Judaism and Islam call for rapid burial without any alteration of the body. But other elements of the standard Christian approach have become common practice for people of many traditions in the United States, and in other Western countries.
- ◇ Authors Lynne Despelder and Albert Stickland list the elements of the standard Christian approach as follows:
  - 1 The deathwatch: Loved ones come to say their good-byes and exchange last words with the dying person, and also to express support and sympathy for the family.
  - 2 Preparation of the deceased: Once the person has died, his or her body is typically prepared, whether for viewing or simply for disposal.
  - 3 A wake or visitation: This is an ingathering of mourners.



- 4 The funeral: Generally speaking, the funeral is the ceremony at which the death of the deceased is formally and publically acknowledged.
- 5 A procession: This moves the corpse from the site of the funeral to the site of burial.
- 6 Disposal of the corpse: The traditional method used by Americans for disposal of the corpse was burial; another common option is cremation.

## CHALLENGES TO THE FUNERAL INDUSTRY

- ◇ A book published in 1963 challenged the practices of the American funeral industry. The book, written by Jessica Mitford, was called *The American Way of Death*.
- ◇ Mitford reported that, in the early 1960s, Americans were setting world records for spending on funerals: \$2 billion a year, which in today's dollars would be nearly \$16 billion. She wrote that, "Americans spend more on funerals than they spend on police protection or fire protection."
- ◇ Mitford's book attacked extravagance and what she considered completely unnecessary indulgences. Mitford was harshly critical of funeral directors (more commonly known as *morticians* in the 1960s) for often taking advantage of people when they were at their most vulnerable.
- ◇ Mitford saved her most barbed criticisms for the practice of embalming: "The purpose of embalming is to make the corpse presentable for viewing in a suitably costly container."
- ◇ Thomas Lynch, a writer and poet who also runs a funeral home, disagrees with Mitford and defends the practice of embalming and preservation of the corpse. He uses the powerful and unsettling example of a girl who had been murdered by "a madman with a baseball bat," contrasting the monstrous actions of the murderer with the care provided by the embalmer.

- ◇ Responding to the criticism that funerals are too expensive, Lynch makes the point that they are ultimately for the benefit of the surviving loved ones, and argues that whatever money is spent is justified by the benefits that the funeral brings.
- ◇ Lynch's points notwithstanding, Jessica Mitford's book raised consumer awareness, and ultimately contributed to increased government control and regulation of the funeral industry.
- ◇ Soon, Americans began to consider alternatives to the expensive practice of burial. The most notable was cremation, which so many Americans had previously shunned. In 1958, only one in 28 Americans was cremated. In the United States today, the national average for cremation is above 40 percent, an increase of over 1,000 percent.
- ◇ One significant factor driving the rise in cremation's popularity is the desire to protect the environment: Burial of embalmed corpses puts carcinogenic formaldehyde-based fluid in the ground, and even un-embalmed corpses need coffins, which take long periods of time to biodegrade.
- ◇ On the other hand, cremation still has a negative impact on the environment through the energy it requires to burn a body, the release of greenhouse gases, and the vaporization of chemicals like the mercury in dental fillings.

## THE POST-MODERN FUNERAL

- ◇ In recent decades, American ingenuity has been applied to what were once primarily Christian death rituals to create what has come to be known as the *post-modern funeral*. In an effort to re-personalize death, people are seeking to participate more in the funeral process and the memorialization of their loved ones.
- ◇ This new approach rejects the complete professionalization of death rituals, and gives loved ones a more active role. It also moves away from a one-size-fits-all model of funerals to something far more individualistic.

- ◇ While the post-modern funeral ceremony might have some traditional elements, like prayer and scripture readings, the focus is now more often on eulogies, telling stories about the deceased, and weaving in elements of music, poetry, and art that are expressive of the dead individual's personality.
- ◇ In keeping with this trend, more Americans have returned to the practice of participating in the preparation of the body through washing and dressing it. People are also having home viewings and home funerals, a natural extension of the wish of more people to die at home.
- ◇ Some people who favor burial are avoiding embalming and the use of elaborate caskets, and choosing so-called green or woodland burials instead. These sometimes involve burying someone in the woods, often where a tree can be planted over the grave. People are also buried in easily decaying material, such as a shroud or a biodegradable casket.
- ◇ Some consider the next step in the evolution of burial to be *human composting*. Seattle resident Katrina Spade received an environmental fellowship for her work designing a facility for human composting, part of what she calls her "Urban Death" project.
- ◇ The dead body is placed inside "carbon-rich material, like wood chips or sawdust," and the addition of extra moisture and nitrogen leads to microbial activity that begins breaking down tissue and creating a "soil-like substance." Spade's goal is to combine this environmentally friendly practice with the kind of ritual that serves the needs of the bereaved.

## EVOLUTION OF CREMATION

- ◇ Cremation, too, is evolving. A process called *resomation* or *flameless cremation* has been developed that involves dissolving the flesh in an alkaline solution to avoid the environmentally problematic process of burning it. After around two hours, only bones remain, and they are then ground into a powder.

- ◇ One-third of Americans who choose cremation bury the remains or put them in a *columbarium*: a mausoleum that is designed to house urns that hold the ashes. Another third of Americans scatter the ashes, whether on the family's property, in national parks, at sea, or somewhere else. (Many states have regulations and restrictions regarding the scattering of ashes.) The final third of Americans prefer to keep the ashes, usually in an urn, at home.
- ◇ It is now possible, however, to repurpose the ashes of your loved one. You can create a diamond from his or her ashes or hair, and have it placed in jewelry such as a ring or pendant. One company mixes ashes with graphite to create a set of pencils so that you can write with the remains of your loved one. Ashes have also been used to fill hourglasses, quite symbolically, and mixed with paint to be used for a portrait of the deceased.
- ◇ A recent alternative that appeals to many environmentalists and those who love the oceans is to mix the ashes into environmentally-safe cast concrete structures on which coral reefs can grow.
- ◇ For a music lover who has died, the ashes can be pressed into vinyl and made into an album, allowing the dead to spin not in their graves but on a turntable. They can also be loaded into shotgun shells and fired.
- ◇ Those with a flair for the dramatic can follow the example of gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson and have their ashes put into fireworks to light up the sky. And people who want to send the ashes still higher can pay a company to launch them into space.

## ONLINE MOURNING

- ◇ An especially significant post-modern development in American death practices is the use of the online world in the process of mourning. People have created online cemeteries and performed online funerals.
- ◇ There are a number of memorial websites that allow people to present photographs, stories, audio, and video of the deceased, and to invite visitors to a website to leave their own reflections.

- ◇ The virtual connection among the hundreds of millions of people who are online—not just in the United States but around the globe—allows the formerly private experiences of death and mourning to be shared on a vast scale. After the deaths of Apple CEO Steve Jobs, comedian Robin Williams, and others, literally millions of tweets, posts, and YouTube videos were posted on the Internet as people formed a virtual community of mourners.
- ◇ The Internet makes it inevitable that the American way of death will have an increasing influence far beyond American shores. At the same time, as Americans observe the death practices of people from other countries and cultures online, we are likely to absorb and be influenced by their ways as well.

## SUGGESTED READING

Fontana and Reid, *Death and Dying in America*.

Garces-Foley and Holcomb, “Contemporary American Funerals.”

Lynch, *The Undertaking*.

Samuel, *Death, American Style*.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 What characterizes traditional, modern, and post-modern funerals in America, and what factors have contributed to the historical transformations?
- 2 How have the online world and the development of social media changed the way we mourn?

# APPROACHES TO DYING WELL

Our lives are shaped profoundly by the knowledge that each of us is going to die. Given the way people die today, most of us will know the disease that will kill us and will have time to deal with it. So it is important that we be prepared. Many people simply think of death as bad, and their main thought regarding death is: “I don’t want to die.” This is a perfectly natural and life-affirming thought. But it can be helpful to begin to think another way: “Since I cannot avoid dying, how I can I die well?”

## A GOOD DEATH

- ◇ What does it mean to die well? There are some characteristics of a “good death” that are shared among virtually all human beings, and there are also features that vary across cultures. An example: the Vaqueiros de Alzada, nomadic cowherds of northern Spain.
- ◇ According to anthropologist Maria Catedra, the Vaqueiros divide deaths into three kinds: good, bad, and tragic. A *good death* is one that is quick, occurs at an old age, is without pain, and occurs without any awareness of the fact that you are dying. In the midst of life, you just drop dead.
- ◇ A *bad death* is slow and painful, and during the process you are aware that you are going to die. It involves prolonged physical pain and emotional anxiety.
- ◇ There are primarily two ways that a *tragic death* can occur. One is that a person dies at a young age. The other is death that is not from natural causes: death by homicide or suicide, or death due to an accident. These can be seen as deaths that interrupted lives that otherwise had more years left.



- ◇ Some tragic deaths, however, involve elements of a good death. For example, a 25-year-old who is killed by a falling tree limb dies a tragic death. But if the death is instant and he never knew what hit him, it would be both a tragic death and a good death, certainly as contrasted with a person who, after being hit, lingers for a while in pain, knowing he's dying before he does so. That's tragic and bad.
- ◇ Of course, not everyone sees death as the Vaqueiros do. Some people aspire to die as consciously as possible, knowing that they are going to die and fully experiencing each moment of it. This allows them to say the things that need to be said, to get their affairs in order, and, perhaps, to gain insight into the nature of life and death.

## DYING WELL

- ◇ In his book, *Dying Well*, Dr. Ira Byock reached two important conclusions. First, although the experience of dying is highly individualized, Byock found that “patients who died most peacefully and families who felt enriched by the passing of a loved one tended to be particularly active in terms of their relationships and discussions of personal and spiritual matters.”
- ◇ Second, Byock found that good deaths were not random events or matters of luck. They could be fostered by the choices of the dying person—choices that could achieve important goals, even on death's doorstep. “Even as they are dying,” Byock wrote, “most people can accomplish meaningful tasks and grow in ways that are important to them and their families.”
- ◇ There is great value in asking the question: “Am I prepared to die?” Let's consider what that preparation involves.

## TUESDAYS WITH MORRIE

- ◇ The book *Tuesdays with Morrie* had a significant impact on the discussion of death in the United States. It was written by columnist Mitch Albom, who based it on a series of weekly conversations he had with 78-year-old

Morrie Schwartz, who had taught Albom Sociology at Brandeis University. Schwartz was dying from ALS. Albom would bring him food each Tuesday, talk with Morrie, and ask him questions.

- ◇ Morrie pointed out that we fail to fully appreciate what we might call the ordinary miracles of life. Facing death is a kind of wake-up call that leads to a reexamination of life, and an ability to see the real priorities more clearly.
- ◇ Morrie told Albom how a practice like meditation can help one deal with the prospect of death, and cope with pain or fear. For instance, after a severe coughing fit, Morrie closed his eyes and took a breath, and explained he was disengaging himself from the coughing fit.
- ◇ Morrie was applying a mindfulness meditation technique from Buddhism. It involves learning to watch what is happening to you without blind reaction or judgment. The goal is to just experience it from as calm a place as possible. Even something like coughing. It requires a lot of practice.
- ◇ Morrie said, “I want to die serenely. Peacefully. And this is where detachment comes in. ... I don’t want to leave the world in a state of fright. I want to know what’s happening, accept it, get to a peaceful place, and let go.”



## STRUGGLING AGAINST DEATH

- ◇ Some people view death very differently. In his famous poem, “Do not go gentle into that good night,” the great poet Dylan Thomas exhorted his father not to gently give in and accept death, but to fight it.
- ◇ He suggests that, while we know that death is inevitable, we think regretfully about all that we have left unsaid and undone. We are not yet finished making the impact that we could, we have not left our full mark, so we must fight death and hold on as long as we can.
- ◇ Author and outspoken atheist Christopher Hitchens wrote about his experience of esophageal cancer. Unlike Dylan Thomas, it was not rage that he felt, but something more like regret and disappointment, which was then followed by a critical perspective on those feelings. He wrote, “Rage would be beside the point. ... Instead, I am badly oppressed by the gnawing sense of waste.”
- ◇ Poet Paul Zweig’s life was changed at the age of 43 when a doctor found a lump at the base of his neck. One way that Zweig responded to his disease was through intense productivity. He wrote, “I felt an incongruous need to finish the book I was working on. Did the world need another book? I knew that wasn’t the question. I felt that writing was my best self.”
- ◇ The 20<sup>th</sup>-century English poet and novelist Philip Larkin gave powerful descriptions of the terror of death that haunted him throughout his life; one of his most unsettling poems is entitled “Aubade.” It is clear that Larkin did not believe in any kind of post-death existence, and he found the prospect of annihilation terrifying.
- ◇ Another way of approaching death is a form of acceptance that differs from the quiet equanimity of some spiritual masters, and is not burdened by fear. When Timothy Leary, the psychologist, writer, and explorer of altered states of consciousness, was diagnosed with inoperable prostate cancer, he decided to die in a very public way: online.

- ◇ He wanted to get people to think about death differently. Leary saw his death as a form of “performance art” that would show others how they could “playfully plan their death experience.”

## PREPARING FOR DEATH

- ◇ Leary’s advice reminds us that there are practical, as well as spiritual, preparations to be made if we are to ensure ourselves the kind of death that we want. In fact, there has been growing interest in recent years in dying outside of a typical hospital environment in the way that Timothy Leary recommended.
- ◇ Many Americans are seeking out what’s known as *palliative care* or *hospice care*, whether at home, in other non-hospital environments, or in hospitals that incorporate those forms of care.
- ◇ Palliative care is specialized medical care that is focused on alleviating suffering in people of any age who have serious illnesses. It can be administered by itself or as an accompaniment to curative treatment.
- ◇ Hospice care provides palliative care to terminally ill patients who are no longer receiving curative treatment, and may only have a short time to live. Both hospice and palliative care put priority on quality of life, rather than length of life.
- ◇ By 2013, over 1.5 million patients were receiving hospice services in the United States, and as of the date of this lecture, the U.S. has over 5,800 hospice programs. According to the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, around two-thirds of U.S. cases of hospice care occur in the patient’s place of residence, which can be a private home, a nursing home, or other facility.
- ◇ Over a quarter occur in hospice inpatient facilities, and the rest occur at hospitals. For many patients, home care is an ideal, as they remain in a comfortable, familiar setting and maintain their own schedules rather than a hospital’s schedule. In-home hospice also allows loved ones to play



a greater role in the care of the dying, which can lead to the deepening of relationships.

- ◇ Home care can be a challenge, however, as it often becomes a 24-hour job for family and friends, who must develop the skills to attend to the patient's needs. This can include administering drugs, operating special equipment, and helping a patient with all bodily needs. It also requires expertise in how to be with someone who is dying, a difficult process for many people.
- ◇ Family members and professionals involved in hospice care must cultivate the skills to know how to be fully present with a dying person, when to support them in their efforts to keep living, and when to help them let go and accept death.
- ◇ At the Zen Hospice Project in San Francisco, staff members practice meditation and other spiritual practices to help them with the challenges of assisting the dying. One of the founders, Frank Ostaseski, said, "As hospice workers, one of our central tasks is to be available when stories are ready to be told."

- ◇ Another practical way of preparing for death, and one that deserves careful attention, is to draw up advance directives: legally binding documents that indicate what kind of medical treatment you want in case you become unable to make decisions or express your wishes in the future. These include:
  - *Living wills*, which indicate what level of medical intervention you want in order to be kept alive.
  - *Health-care proxies*, which appoint another person to serve as your representative, to make decisions if you become incapacitated.
  - *Do not resuscitate*, or DNR, orders, which must be signed by a physician and instruct medical staff not to resuscitate you if you suffer cardiac or respiratory failure.
- ◇ You can also ensure yourself and your loved ones greater peace of mind in the face of death by drawing up a will. By indicating how you want your property to be distributed, you can spare those you love from having to deal with difficult legal issues while they are already facing the challenges of mourning.
- ◇ An *ethical will* is still another kind of document that enables you to share important thoughts with those you leave behind. Through it, you can express your ideals, communicate lessons you have learned from life, share memories and hopes, offer advice, ask for forgiveness, and express love.

## SUGGESTED READING

Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie*.

Blackman, *Graceful Exits*.

Byock, *Dying Well*.

Riemer and Stampfer, *So That Your Values Live On*.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 What does it mean to die well?
- 2 What would your ideal death look like?
- 3 To what extent have you prepared to die?
- 4 Have you written an “ethical will”? If not, what would you want your final message to your loved ones to be?

# JUDAISM ON DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE

**I**n 1970s America, only 19 percent of American Jews were found to believe in an afterlife. Today, according to surveys in recent years, between 38 to 46 percent of American Jews believe in an afterlife, which represents an interesting resurgence in American Jewish belief. In this lecture, we're going to take a closer look at Jewish views on death and what may follow it, how they developed over time, and how they shape Jewish practices relating to death today.

## DIVERGENT VIEWS

- ◇ The three main forms of Judaism contain many divergent views within themselves. Orthodox Judaism sees itself as most devoted to tradition. Broadly speaking, Conservative Judaism is less traditional than Orthodox Judaism in matters of belief and practice, and Reform Judaism is the least tradition-bound of the three.
- ◇ Of the three forms, Orthodox Judaism is the one that makes most frequent reference to an afterlife. Most practicing Jews in the West, however, belong either to Conservative or Reform Judaism, and it is rare that the afterlife is a major topic of sermons in their synagogues or Jewish education programs. Conservative and Reform Jews therefore often are left to develop their own views on the subject.
- ◇ In the Hebrew Bible, God establishes a covenant with the people of Israel. In this covenant, God does not promise that eternal life will be granted to them. The promise is that if the people follow God's commandments, God will grant them descendants, their people (the tribe) will flourish, and they will be given the land of Israel, the sacred center of which will be Jerusalem.



- ◇ The Rabbinic tradition, however, features the term *Olam Haba*, the “world to come.” To some Jews, these words suggest an afterlife. Others interpret them as a reference to a time when a great leader, known as the Mashiach (meaning “messiah,” but unlike the Christian notion, fully human), will come and establish justice and an end to wickedness and sin in the world.
- ◇ In books of the Hebrew Bible such as Psalms and Isaiah, the place people go after death is called *Sheol*. The term seems to refer to an underworld, that is, a domain beneath the earth. There is no sense of reward or punishment there. It is a pale imitation of life on earth. One wants to avoid going there as long as possible.
- ◇ So for the ancient Israelites, death was not a complete annihilation of life, nor did it bring reward or punishment for one’s deeds. In a sense, it was the diminishment of life. One of the most lamentable parts of existence in *Sheol* is that those who dwell there *forget*, and one thing that is forgotten is the connection with God.
- ◇ Another place in the Hebrew Bible that comes to be associated with the afterlife is Gehinnom. It was seen as an impure place, filled with death and acts that were in opposition to God’s will.
- ◇ At some point, the Jewish notion of a world to come became linked with the idea of the resurrection of the body after death: God would establish his righteous kingdom on earth, and would raise the dead so they could dwell in it.
- ◇ Belief in resurrection became more widespread in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. This was a period in which Jews were suffering under the yoke of occupation by the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire, and the enforced practice of its polytheistic religion. Under such circumstances, the notion of a “world to come” may have provided solace.
- ◇ Disagreements arose, however, over resurrection’s validity. In the latter part of the Second Temple period that ended in 70 C.E., there was a debate between Pharisees, who believed in resurrection, and Sadducees, who argued that the soul perishes along with the body and that there is no afterlife.

- ◇ In spite of its detractors, the concept of resurrection survived, and its promise took on clear importance in Judaism. The Mishnah, a portion of the Talmud that was compiled around 200 C.E., states that “the one who says that the resurrection of the dead is a teaching that does not derive from the Torah” does not have a share in the world to come.
- ◇ It’s important to note that the ancient Jewish understanding of resurrection differed from the belief, held by people of different faiths today, in disembodied souls rising to heaven. They envisioned the body and soul as being resurrected together.
- ◇ Between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Greek belief in a soul that survives death without a body became increasingly prominent among Jews. In particular, Reform Jews who do believe in an afterlife, and reject supernatural elements like resurrection, are more drawn to the notion of an immortal soul.
- ◇ Reincarnation, another idea often associated with other world views, also developed as a belief in Judaism, although it has always been a minority view. It is most often seen in Jewish mysticism or Kabbalah, in Hasidism—a form of pietistic Orthodox Judaism—and in the Yiddish literature of diaspora Jews in Europe.
- ◇ The Hebrew word for “reincarnation” is *Gilgul*, which means “cycle.” The idea is that the soul goes through cycles of birth and death, allowing for cleansing of sin.

## SOURCES OF DISBELIEF

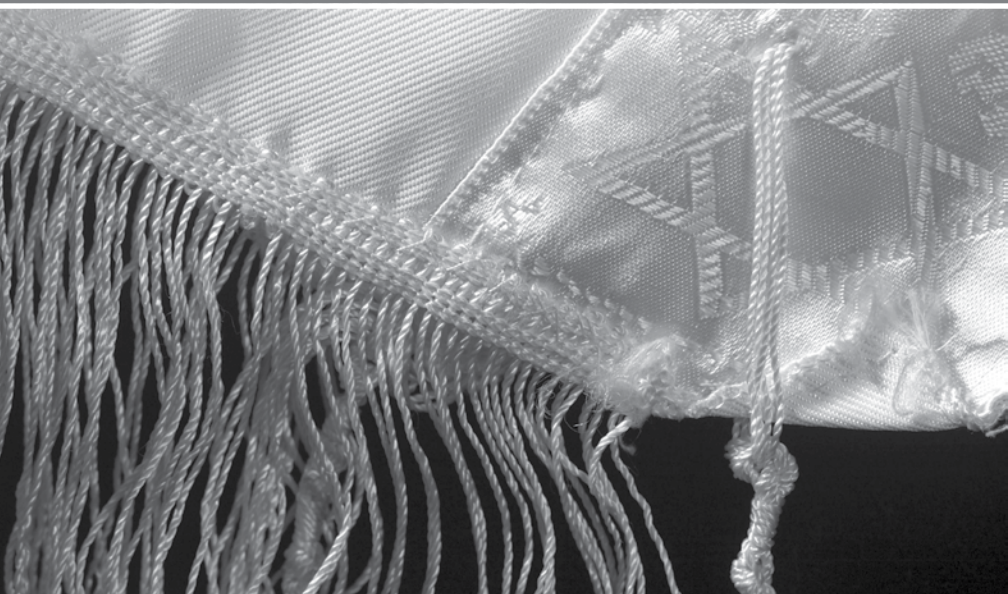
- ◇ How did many modern Jews get the idea that the afterlife has no place in Judaism? One explanation is that there are texts within the Hebrew Bible that seem to suggest that death is the end of us. In addition, there are also remarkably few passages in the Hebrew Bible that deal with the afterlife at all.

- ◇ To a large extent, however, the Jewish stance of nonbelief or agnosticism toward an afterlife is a result of a rationalism that originated in the Enlightenment. Reform Judaism, which was established in Germany in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, embraced rationalism and modernity, and sought to put Judaism's long history of persecution and isolation behind it.
- ◇ The inclination against the supernatural was reflected in the Reform prayer book, which Reform Jews use during services. Cantor Sheri Allen points out that in the Amidah, an ancient Jewish prayer, God was described as *M'Chayei haMeitim*, that is, the one who "gives life to the dead."
- ◇ In the Reform book *Gates of Prayer*, released in 1975, however, the phrase was changed to *M'Chayei haKol*, which means the one who "gives life to all," thereby avoiding any mention of resurrection. In the version of the prayer book released in 2007, however, the original wording is brought back in parentheses, so that both options are side-by-side. The revision suggests that the afterlife still has a constituency, even among Reform Jews.

## REGARDING THE DEAD

- ◇ Jewish beliefs regarding death, in all their diversity, are naturally reflected in Jewish practices with respect to the dead. In Judaism, the body we have been given is a gift from God, and even after death it must be treated with utmost care and respect.
- ◇ Even for those who believe in the afterlife, the death of a loved one is experienced and treated as a painful loss. In the Hebrew Bible, the first thing that the patriarch Jacob did when he thought that his son Joseph had died was to tear his clothes. It became traditional for Jews to tear their clothing upon the death of a loved one.
- ◇ From the time of death until the burial, the body of the deceased must not be left alone. A person called a *shomer*, or guard, stays with it, reading psalms, stories, or poetry that meant something to the one who has died. Candles are often placed around the body.

- ◇ Members of the Chevra Kadisha, volunteers from an area synagogue, help prepare the body for burial, sometimes along with family members. They wash the body of the deceased in order to purify it. Tradition calls for the body to be clothed only in a simple, white burial garment, a robe-like shroud that is often made of linen and has no pockets. The shroud represents the idea that there are no distinctions among people in death; all are equal before God.
- ◇ Observant Jews will often be buried in a prayer shawl, from which the fringes on one corner are removed (representing that the prayer shawl will no longer be used, which can be seen as a form of tie-breaking).
- ◇ Burial, either in a simple wooden casket or directly in the ground, should take place within 24 hours or as soon as possible after death. The speed is a necessity in the hot climate where the tradition arose. There should be no embalming, other manipulation, or preservation of the body. Consequently, there is no viewing of the body or open casket ceremony.
- ◇ Traditionally, Jewish custom has the mourners themselves fill the grave following the lowering of the coffin, although this is often done symbolically by shoveling in a small amount of earth. This can be understood as



a tie-breaking ritual, requiring a physical act to imprint on the body and mind the reality of death.

- ◇ Most observant Jews (and certainly all Orthodox Jews) consider cremation prohibited, as they believe that the body should be allowed to decompose naturally and return to the earth of which it is made. In the modern period, cremation has become increasingly acceptable to many non-Orthodox Jews, although after the Holocaust, some Jews have seen a painful association with the fires of the crematoria.
- ◇ The funeral itself can be held at graveside, in a synagogue, or in a funeral home. The funeral service is normally conducted by a rabbi or cantor, but this is not required by Jewish law. The main elements of the usually short, simple ritual are the reading of prayers and psalms, and the giving of eulogies for the deceased. At the end of the service, a memorial prayer called *El Malei Rachamim* is recited. The prayer asks the merciful God to give rest to the deceased and to protect his or her soul.
- ◇ If the funeral is not held at the graveside, pallbearers then carry the body to the burial site, and a short ceremony occurs at the grave. This consists of additional prayers and recitations, including the Mourner's Kaddish, which praises and glorifies God.
- ◇ Judaism helps guide the bereaved through the process of grief with a series of periods that gradually lead them back to daily life while giving them ways to continue to honor the memory of their loved one and express sadness.
- ◇ The first period is one in which the family members begin a period of intense mourning, known as *sitting shiva*. *Shiva* is Hebrew for "seven;" the period traditionally lasts seven days. Friends and neighbors come to sit with the mourning family, share grief, and show support.
- ◇ The second period of mourning (known as *shloshim*, for 30) occurs in the month following burial. Mourners do not attend social gatherings during the second period, and continue to recite the Mourner's Kaddish daily. For those mourning the loss of parents, this period lasts for a year after death, an expression of the unique place of the parent in the life of a Jew.

Jewish Cemetery  
Lodz, Poland



ד' ינואר רמ"ו  
ליזרון לזריות הבאים - הרצח האכזרי  
של אברהם פרוח קבוצ המסירה וה' כחול  
צפורה טורבינקא נ' שנה כ"א ד'ת'  
שמואל ריכברד נ' - כ"א  
אברהם פערל נ' - כ"א  
יחזאל פורמן נ' - כ"א  
שנעלו מות קרשים כמבור עולמים  
על המוכה של הושעת חיינו הקדוש  
כ"א אדר א' תש"ו  
ט"ה הרבנים הכבודיים - א"ש כבודם לרבים  
על הביטוח של משרדו וה' כבודם  
בחייל הכבוד על גבורי קרשים  
קרבות המולדת - מנחם הכהן  
הנצ"ב

פ"נ  
שמואל  
ריכברד

פ"נ  
צפורה  
דובי-סקה



- ◇ After that, mourners participate in memorial services four times a year as part of the observance of the Jewish holidays of Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot. On every anniversary of the person's death, a *yahrzeit* (or anniversary) candle is lit. The person's children, parents, spouse, and siblings recite the Mourner's Kaddish, and some fast.
- ◇ Some time between the second month and a full year after a loved one's death, the tombstone is unveiled. There is a short service, the words on the tombstone are read, and people often place a pebble on the grave to mark their visit. Like the "second burial" performed in some religions, the Jewish tombstone ritual provides a space for the mourners to think about the deceased without the emotional intensity of the funeral, which comes so soon after the death.

## SUGGESTED READING

Diamant, *Saying Kaddish*.

Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*.

Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 Why do many people claim that Jews "don't believe in an afterlife," while others argue that they do?
- 2 In what ways have Jewish perspectives on the afterlife changed over the centuries and why?
- 3 What do Jewish mourning practices say about the values of the Jewish community?

# DEATH AND HOPE IN CHRISTIANITY

**I**n this lecture, we're going to explore Christianity's view of death, and how it's reflected in Christian practices and rituals relating to death. The defeat of death is proclaimed many times in the New Testament and in later writings of Christian authorities. But while death does not have the final say in Christian theology, it has a central role. Most Christians believe that Jesus was fully divine, but also fully human. All humans die, but Jesus was raised to life beyond death, and Christians believe that humans can be incorporated into this everlasting life as well.

## CHRISTIAN VIEWS

- ◇ Christians are incorporated into the story of Christ's death and resurrection through two rituals: baptism and communion, which is also called the Lord's Supper, or the Eucharist. By partaking in the blood and body of Christ through the ritual of the Eucharist, Christians remember him and connect themselves with his death.
- ◇ Although Christians agree that death can be defeated, they don't all view death in the same way. Some look at it as the natural fate of human beings, and see resurrection as a miraculous act of God in saving us from dissolution and decay.
- ◇ Others, however, see death and suffering as a punishment. In this view, Adam is the one who brought sin and death into the world by disobeying God's commands in the Garden of Eden. Jesus is the one who enables humanity to transcend its fate.



- ◇ Theologian Janet Soskice offers a third Christian view of death: God does not impose suffering, illness and death as punishments. Rather, death is the enemy that needs to be conquered.

## OVERCOMING DEATH

- ◇ The details of how death is overcome and what follows it are the subject of much debate in Christianity. Ambiguities in the story as to whether Jesus was resurrected as a physical being or only as a spirit have provided fuel for controversy on how resurrection will occur for human beings.
- ◇ The evidence that Jesus had a physical body after the resurrection includes the fact that he ate fish and most famously, that Thomas—the man who would give rise to the phrase “doubting Thomas”—touched Jesus’s wounds.
- ◇ But there is also evidence that his was no ordinary body, and that at times it seems to more closely resemble a spiritual body. For instance, Jesus appears out of thin air and vanishes instantly, in one case suddenly appearing in a room even though the door was locked.
- ◇ Christians also disagree over what happens to the deceased between their deaths and resurrection, which is expected to occur only at the end of the world as we know it. Augustine believed that the dead sleep in some way, and then awaken during the resurrection.
- ◇ Theologian John Hick points out that in two of the literary texts that best capture the Christian imagined vision of the afterlife (and also shaped it)—Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*—the emphasis is on the journey of the soul after death, not on the resurrected body. At least in the United States, it appears that this view has won out.



*Divine Comedy, Inferno, Canto 14:  
The Violent, Tortured in the Rain of Fire*

— Gustave Doré

## THE AFTERLIFE: HELL

- ◇ Throughout Christianity's history, theologians and authorities have strongly emphasized the afterlife, particularly Hell. Many preachers and missionaries put the fear of Hell and the threat of God's anger at the center of their theology.
- ◇ Of all the imagery associated with Hell in scripture (both the Bible and Qur'an), the most widely used is fire. Hell is described in terms of endless burning flames and never-ending torment.
- ◇ The doctrine of eternal damnation in Hell has been criticized throughout Christian history, and with great frequency in recent decades.

- ◇ This brings us to a question faced by members of every tradition regarding the language of scripture: Is it literal or is it metaphorical? Are Heaven and Hell actual places that people go when they die, or do they metaphorically describe states of the soul?
- ◇ This debate played out in 1999 when Pope John Paul II described Heaven and Hell as being states of the soul rather than physical places. Heaven is the state of the soul in communion with God and in God's presence; Hell is the state of being away from God, alienated and separated from one's creator.
- ◇ Some conservative Protestant theologians disagreed, arguing that they are actual places, and that if people did not believe that, they would lose the incentive to behave morally.

## THE AFTERLIFE: PURGATORY

- ◇ Purgatory is the place where people who die go to cleanse themselves of sin in order to become fit to enter Heaven. The dead must be purified and prepared to be in the presence of God. Father Joseph McGovern explains that sin throws one's life out of balance, and it must be "made right again."
- ◇ While Purgatory has long been a part of Catholic doctrine, it is generally absent among Protestant denominations.
- ◇ Opposition to the idea of Purgatory arose when the Catholic Church began to offer prayers for the dead in return for donations from loved ones who wanted to help their deceased family members get to Heaven. A growing chorus of critics saw this as nothing more than a way for the clergy to squeeze money from the bereaved.
- ◇ This was one of the complaints of Martin Luther that led to his break with the Roman Catholic Church. In Purgatory's place, Luther articulated a doctrine of the "sleeping" dead, who would be awakened on the Last Day and resurrected. John Calvin, on the other hand, argued that the souls of the dead went immediately to Heaven or Hell after death, eventually

reuniting with the resurrected body. In either case, though, Heaven and Hell were the only destinations for the soul.

- ◇ It's worth noting that Purgatory is not the same thing as Limbo. Limbo was integrated into Catholic doctrine starting around the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It was the place for infants who died before being baptized, and for virtuous pagans such as Socrates, Plato, and the Old Testament patriarchs, who died before the coming of Christ.

## THE AFTERLIFE: HEAVEN

- ◇ While Heaven has been described many ways by various theologians over time, the primary theme contained in all accounts is that human beings exist in the glorious, loving presence of God.
- ◇ One point of disagreement is whether it is a static or dynamic experience. Do people grow and learn there, form relationships, and engage in activities? Or, as Luther and Calvin believed, do they exist in a static (and ecstatic) state?
- ◇ There has also been disagreement since Christianity's earliest days on who can gain admission to heaven. Broadly speaking, the many views on this issue can be grouped into three categories.
  - Exclusivists believe that only Christians can be saved (not that they are guaranteed salvation; they are merely eligible).
  - Inclusivists believe that people don't need to be Christian to be saved. But if you get into Heaven, you're saved by Jesus regardless.
  - Pluralists see people of each religion as eligible to enter Heaven as believers in their own religion.
- ◇ In a recent survey, 83 percent of Christians in mainline Protestant churches, 79 percent of Catholics, and 57 percent of Evangelical Protestants said "many religions can lead to eternal life." This is a dramatic increase from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when fewer than 10 percent of Christians were pluralists.

## TREATMENT OF DEATH

- ◇ In Catholicism, the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick is administered to the gravely ill or those who are about to undergo a serious operation. Many Protestant denominations still practice some form of this ritual, but it is not considered a sacrament.
- ◇ Virtually all forms of Christianity have prayers of healing for the sick. In some cases, such as Pentecostal communities, there will be a laying on of hands with the hope for miraculous healing.
- ◇ In the Catholic Church, a Communion of Saints is said to connect all living and dead members of the Catholic Church, including saints, who are thought to be able to serve as channels for God's grace.
- ◇ According to Father Joseph McGovern, the living can "benefit from the prayers of the fellow communicants in heaven," meaning "that ... death is only a temporary separation which affects what people can do, but they are always capable of helping others get to Heaven."
- ◇ In the Middle Ages, this belief led people to venerate the physical remains of saints—usually bones, but also items such as clothing or books that were said to have come into contact with a saint's body.
- ◇ Protestants, in contrast, may feel themselves united with fellow Christians living or dead, but they don't venerate relics; don't accept the Catholic Church's authority to designate saints; reject the idea of Purgatory; and pray only to God.

## FUNERAL PRACTICES

- ◇ The official Catholic funeral ritual is described in the *Order of Christian Funerals*. There are three principal rites. The first is the vigil, or wake, which takes place following the death but before the funeral.

- ◇ The second is the funeral liturgy itself, which usually involves communion, and connects the life and death of the deceased with the life and death of Jesus Christ.
- ◇ The third rite is committal, where the body or ashes of the deceased are put in the grave, the sea, or place of internment. On the one-month anniversary of the death, it is common to have a Mass for the deceased.
- ◇ Mass is also celebrated annually for all deceased parish members on November 2, All Souls' Day. It is a time to pray for the dead, and to meditate and reflect on death and salvation.
- ◇ The basic structure of contemporary Protestant death rituals is similar in many ways to that of the Catholic rites. There is normally a visitation that lasts one or two days, the funeral in a church or funeral home chapel, and the rite of committal at which the body is put in the ground. It is also common to have memorial services after the burial or cremation.
- ◇ A typical Protestant funeral includes the following elements: psalms and hymns, music, prayer, scripture readings, a homily, the Lord's Prayer, and commendation. Some denominations include communion in the funeral service.
- ◇ As in the Catholic Church, eulogies were previously discouraged or forbidden in Protestant funerals, as the focus was supposed to be on such themes as salvation, faith, and resurrection, not on the deceased. But with the increasing individualism of the post-Enlightenment West, eulogies became very common.
- ◇ At the heart of the Christian story is the fact that God became human for the sake of humanity, and was willing to die selflessly in order that human beings can live eternally. The Christian God is not only the God of those who suffer, but the God who suffers with us.

## SUGGESTED READING

Soskice, "Dying Well in Christianity."

Thompson, *Hoping for More*.

Verhey, *The Christian Art of Dying*.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 In what ways do Christians see their deaths as connected with the death of Jesus Christ?
- 2 What are the main differences between Catholic and Protestant attitudes toward and practices involving death?
- 3 Is the notion of everlasting damnation compatible with the belief in a merciful and compassionate God?
- 4 How have Heaven and Hell been conceived throughout Christian history? Do you find literal or metaphorical interpretations more compelling?

# ISLAM ON RETURNING TO GOD

Islamic beliefs and practices regarding death are based, first and foremost, on the Qur'an and on the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad, God's messenger. Muhammad's words and deeds are contained in reports known as Hadith. While actual Muslim practice can sometimes deviate from what is found in the texts (a phenomenon seen in all religions), and while culture can influence beliefs and practices, the texts play a central role in the life and death of every practicing Muslim. In this lecture, we're going to explore death in Islam by examining those texts and how they are understood and applied.

## MUSLIM BELIEFS

- ◇ Muslims are reminded continuously of the eternal consequences of how they live, and that every act they do counts in the end. In the Qur'an, God asks, "Are you so content with the life of *this* world, rather than the next world? Yet the enjoyment of the life of this world, compared with the next, is a little thing."
- ◇ Muslims believe that as all beings are created by God, so do all beings return to God. The concept of the return is central in Islam, and the revelation reminds Muslims that "To God belongs everything in the heavens and the earth, and all things are taken back to Him."
- ◇ The Qur'an states, "It is not possible for a soul to die except with the permission of God at a term set down on record." Human beings should not try to usurp the power over life and death. This means that Islam forbids suicide and active euthanasia.



- ◇ Most Muslims believe that God's judgment will send us in an embodied state either to Paradise, called *Janna*, or to Hell, *Jahannam*. At the moment of death, a person is said to be visited by the Angel of Death, who takes human souls from their bodies.
- ◇ Until the resurrection, according to the Hadith, the deceased lie in their graves in what is called the *Barzakh* state. *Barzakh* means "separation," and indicates the division between the physical and spiritual worlds, or between life and death. The only people who skip this intermediate period and directly take up residence in Paradise are martyrs.
- ◇ Two angels, whose names are Munkar and Nakir, are said to visit every grave and question the deceased. Questions include, "Whom have you worshipped?" and "Who was your prophet?" Those who demonstrate their faith by answering correctly will rest in comfort until Judgment Day in spacious graves with a view of Paradise. According to some, they will ultimately enter an unconscious state, like dreamless sleep, until the resurrection.

The Qur'an teaches earthly existence is only one part—but an important part—of an infinitely greater story.



- ◇ Those who do not answer correctly will be tormented by the angels and sealed into cramped graves, where they must spend this intermediate period being stung and bitten by scorpions and spiders and viewing, through a window opened by the angels, the horrors of hell that await them. As with many key teachings, this can be understood literally or metaphorically.

## THE FINAL JUDGMENT

- ◇ For Muslims, then, our life on earth can be understood as a test to determine the ultimately important thing—our eternal fate.
- ◇ Judgment Day is the day not only when each person stands before God, but also when the world as we know it ends in cataclysm. The Qur'an and Hadith are filled with descriptions of the signs that will herald it. They include the coming of al-Dajjal, a false messiah figure analogous to the Antichrist; the coming of the Mahdi, a messianic redeemer figure; and the second coming of Jesus (Isa in Arabic), who, together with the Mahdi, will defeat al-Dajjal.
- ◇ At the final judgment, each person is accountable only for him or herself. No person must answer for the sins of ancestors, nor may he or she benefit from an ancestor's good deeds. Males and females are judged in the same way.
- ◇ The Qur'an indicates that both right belief and right actions are required to get into Paradise. There is no "justification by faith alone" in Islam. There is also no notion of "original sin" in Islam; People are not born with a stain of sin that must be removed by grace.
- ◇ Rather, human beings are born with an innate awareness of their Creator. The main problem for people is *forgetting* this. Islamic rituals—especially prayers—are intended to remind us to return to God (as we will in the end).
- ◇ Good deeds are important on Judgment Day, but intentions are also judged. Acts that are good in the sight of God are those that are motivated by the right intention. Whatever one's deeds and intentions have been, there is always the possibility that God will respond to genuine repentance with mercy and forgiveness.

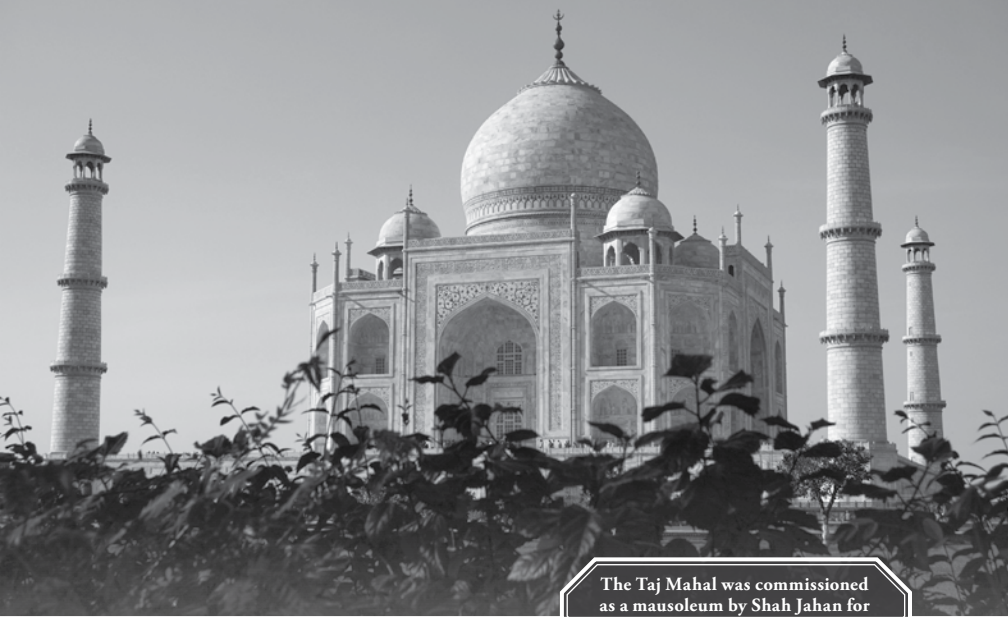
- ◇ The one sin that is *not* forgiven is *shirk*: putting other things on the same level as God and worshipping them. This can refer to polytheism, but it can also refer to taking money, power, or fame as one's god. Many Muslims believe that committing *shirk* is guaranteed to land a person in Hell.

## PARADISE AND HELL

- ◇ What is the nature of the afterlife? In Muslim scripture, Paradise is often associated with peace, bliss, refuge, and, most commonly, a garden. In Paradise, there is flowing water (certainly a heavenly characteristic to those who live in a dry desert climate), meadows, food, and drink.
- ◇ Scripture indicates that the dead will be resurrected in their bodies, and Paradise is filled with delights for the senses. There are descriptions of beautiful mansions. People are adorned with gold jewelry and silk clothes.
- ◇ Husbands and wives who gain entrance to Paradise remain together, people who die unmarried will be married to beautiful companions, and sexual pleasure is an important element of the relationships. In Islam, sex is viewed positively as long as it is in accordance with Islamic law, and there are no major traditions of celibacy.
- ◇ Beyond these sensual pleasures, however, the ultimate *spiritual* reward that Paradise offers is spending eternity in the presence of God. The Qur'an says that those who are in Paradise "shall have grace in (God's) sight. That is the supreme triumph."
- ◇ Hell is described in the Qur'an primarily in terms of fire. There is no shade; the water is boiling; the food chokes those who eat it. Other than pain, the primary feeling of those in Hell is regret. Things are so bad that they pray for annihilation. There is some debate as to whether or not Hell is eternal.
- ◇ And as in most religions, there are exclusivists, inclusivists, and pluralists in Islam, all of whom can and do use the Qur'an, Hadith, and various interpretive strategies to support their views.

## DEATH PRACTICES

- ◇ Since not only beliefs, but also deeds, are essential in Islam, great weight is placed on adherence to lawful Islamic practices, including those surrounding death. The dying person should have his face turned toward Mecca if possible.
- ◇ After death, there are four main practices that are prescribed by Islamic law: ritual bathing of the corpse, shrouding of the body, funeral prayer, and burial. Muslims strongly discourage embalming and transporting the body long distances. But in cases where there is no choice but to transport the body, some form of preservation can be employed.
- ◇ The body must be washed and buried as quickly as possible, ideally on the day of death. As in Judaism, the body is wrapped in a simple white cotton shroud. Ideally, this should be the garment worn on the *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca that all Muslims are required to take in their lives if they are physically and financially capable.
- ◇ Martyrs, however, are not washed, otherwise purified, or specially clothed, because they are already pure and guaranteed a place in Paradise. Thus, they are just buried in the clothes they were wearing at the time of their death.
- ◇ Muslim funeral prayers, or *Salat al-Janazah*, must be said in the presence of the corpse. The funeral service normally includes recitation of Al-Fathiha (the opening), proclamations of *Allahu Akbar* (“God is Great,” or “God is Greatest”), and an additional prayer.
- ◇ The body is carried on a bier by four men (often taking turns with other groups of four) in a procession to the burial site. Women do not normally join the funeral procession. The body should be placed directly in the ground if possible (otherwise with a simple casket), lying on the right side with the head facing Mecca. Traditionally, each mourner puts three handfuls of soil into the grave.



The Taj Mahal was commissioned as a mausoleum by Shah Jahan for his deceased wife, Mumtaz Mahal.

- ◇ Muslims scholars agree that there should be no elaborate gravestones for Muslims; a small marker is sufficient. Here is a place where actual practice sometimes departs from what is prescribed, however, as some Muslim cemeteries, according to scholar Frederick Denny, “contain elaborate and costly mausoleums, some of which are masterpieces of Islamic architecture.”
- ◇ Muslim should mourn for lost loved ones, but they are not to mourn excessively, as one must accept the will of God. The official period of mourning is the first three days after the burial. During the forty days after burial, there may be further occasions to remember the deceased with prayers, Qur’an recitations, and special meals. These traditions help mourners to attain the acceptance of their loss that Islam prescribes.

## FORMS OF ISLAM

- ◇ The two main forms of Islam are Sunni Islam, which comprises around 85 percent of the world's Muslims, and Shia Islam, which accounts for most of the remaining 15 percent. When it comes to the fundamental teachings of Islam—the belief in one God, the prophethood of Muhammad, and the perfection and authority of the Qur'an—the two branches are largely the same.
- ◇ The original division between the two traditions stems from a dispute over succession, with Sunnis believing that leaders of the Muslim community should be selected by consensus, while the Shia believe that authority is passed down from Muhammad on a hereditary basis—specifically, through his cousin and son-in-law Ali, and his grandsons Hassan and Husayn. This Shia belief established a lineage of leaders, called *Imams*, who are considered to be divinely inspired, essentially sinless and inerrant.
- ◇ This difference in views of leadership and the nature of authority has given rise to other differences over time. One is the strong emphasis on martyrdom in Shia Islam. While martyrs who are willing to die for the sake of righteousness and in the name of God are held in very high regard by all Muslims (and people in many religions), Shia Muslims have a consciousness of persecution, resistance, and martyrdom that is particularly strong.
- ◇ One system, Sufism, has been called the “mystical” form of Islam—a reasonable description, as Sufis undertake spiritual practices in order to cultivate the experience of God. These practices include meditation, contemplative or ecstatic forms of music and singing, movement or dance, and group rituals called *dhikrs*.
- ◇ The various forms of Islam are united in the importance they place on an awareness of death in daily life. The great 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century Muslim theologian and philosopher Al-Ghazali advises Muslims to reflect on their mortality each night as they lie in bed: “Sleep on your right side, the side on which the corpse reclines in the tomb. ... Perhaps God most high will take your spirit this night; so be prepared to meet Him by being in a condition of purity when you sleep.”

## SUGGESTED READING

Campo, "Muslim Ways of Death."

Rustomji, *The Garden and the Fire*.

Smith and Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 How have Paradise and Hell been understood and envisioned within Islam?
- 2 What is the range of Islamic positions on the fate of non-Muslims after death?
- 3 What are the distinctive features of the Sufi approach to death?

## LECTURE 12

# DEATH, REBIRTH, AND LIBERATION IN HINDUISM

**I**n contemporary America, death is often hidden from view. Corpses are put out of sight or preserved in a lifelike way with embalming and makeup. This is not the case in India, particularly in the northern city of Varanasi, or Benares. The holy Ganges River, venerated as goddess Ganga Ma (Mother Ganges), runs through the city, and Hindus from all over the world come to Varanasi to die, be cremated, and have their ashes poured into the river. But why do so many Hindus want to die in Varanasi? This lecture considers how death is viewed in Hinduism.

Varanasi, India





## HINDUISM

- ◇ Hindus aspire to liberation from the cycle of rebirth, suffering, and death known as *samsara*. There are many practices and disciplines that can lead to liberation, but dying in Varanasi is like a shortcut. Dying in this city enables a person to escape *samsara* and achieve liberation, or *moksha*.
- ◇ Hinduism is a diverse family of traditions with tremendous variation and some widely shared features. Hinduism features innumerable gods—in the Indian tradition of hyperbole, it is sometimes said that there are 330 million gods—but at the same time Hinduism strongly emphasizes oneness, the unity of all things.
- ◇ One thing that virtually all observant Hindus believe in is the sacred authority of the ancient texts called the Vedas. Scholars believe that the earliest Vedas were composed around 1500 B.C.E. in an ancient language called *Vedic Sanskrit*.
- ◇ The Vedic period in India centered on rituals carried out by priests of the Brahmin class. The people of the Vedic period asked for worldly blessings during their rituals—health, victory, sons, wealth (in the form of many cows), and a long life. Death was something to be put off as long as possible.
- ◇ One of the earliest Vedic understandings of death involved the *Pitrloka*, the “World of the Ancestors.” The dead join the realm of the ancestors if the proper rituals are performed and the proper offerings are made.
- ◇ The notion of offering or sacrifice is deeply important in the Vedic world. In the Vedas, the universe itself arose from an act of sacrifice when a primordial, cosmic being named *Purusha* died. His various body parts became different parts of the world.

## THE UPANISHADS

- ◇ The beliefs in *samsara* and *moksha* are derived from a set of highly philosophical texts called the Upanishads, written around the 6<sup>th</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> centuries B.C.E. While the earlier Vedas focused on rituals, the Upanishads say, “Unsteady, indeed, are these boats in the form of sacrifices ... in which is prescribed only the inferior work. The fools who delight in this sacrificial ritual as the highest spiritual good go again and again through the cycle of old age and death.”
- ◇ The thought of being born again and again does not provide comfort to Hindus. It just means that all of life’s suffering will be experienced over and over again. This suffering results from our attachment to things that are impermanent.
- ◇ This process of rebirth is driven by the production of *karma*. *Karma* is somewhat like a moral law of cause and effect. While good *karma* leads to more desirable rebirth and bad *karma* can land one in misery, the ultimate goal is to cease production of *karma* altogether so as not to fuel the cycle for another round.
- ◇ But what is liberation, and how is it attained? To answer these questions, we must look at some key ideas in the Upanishads. The first is that there exists an ultimate reality, known as *Brahman*, which is described as “all-pervading, self-existent ... eternal ... the imperishable source of all things.”
- ◇ The soul, or true and eternal self, is known as *Atman*. When the body dies, the *Atman* finds rebirth in another body until the *Atman* finds liberation.
- ◇ Beliefs about the nature of liberation, however, differ among Hindus. If one believes in a nondualistic conception of reality, where *Atman* and *Brahman* are the same, then liberation means recognizing this identity, thus ending the cycle of rebirth.
- ◇ Some Hindus, however, are dualists who believe that *Atman* and *Brahman* are separate. For them, liberation is abiding forever in the presence of the divine, ultimate reality—*Brahman*.

## THE *BHAGAVAD GITA*

- ◇ So how does one achieve liberation? For this we turn to one of best-known scriptures of the Hindu tradition: the *Bhagavad Gita*, a text that comes from the great Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*. In the text, Krishna, considered by his devotees as the supreme god in human form, teaches the warrior Arjuna the truth of the eternal soul.
- ◇ Krishna assures Arjuna that if he kills his opponents on the battlefield, he only kills their bodies. The real self cannot be killed, so Arjuna need not mourn.
- ◇ The Gita lays out different paths to liberation, or *yogas*, focusing on four: *karma yoga*, the practice of selfless action and service; *jnana yoga*, the path of knowledge and wisdom; *raja yoga*, meditative or contemplative practice; and the path most commonly seen among Hindus in India and abroad, *bhakti yoga*, the yoga of devotion, love of God.
- ◇ The Gita also discusses the possibility of liberation for the person who can let go of the ego to unite with the absolute. The individual self abides eternally in the divine presence, which in the Gita, is understood as Krishna.

## HINDU GODS

- ◇ The Hindu god who is the personification of death is Yama, Lord of the Dead. It is said that Yama was the first mortal, the first being to die. However, by overcoming selfishness and the fear of death, and by remaining loyal to the gods, he attained divine status. As he was the first to die, so he is the one to lead all who come after him in death, making Yama the *Pitr-raja*, or “ruler of the ancestors.”
- ◇ Shiva is one of the most widely worshipped gods. Varanasi, the city of the dead on the Ganges, is his city. Many people think of Shiva as the destroyer. While Shiva does, in a sense, bring about the dissolution of all things, this very act prepares the way for new creation, with which he is also associated.



Kali, Hindu goddess of time

- ◇ The goddess most associated with death is the often-terrifying Kali. Kali is the goddess of time, which makes her a goddess of death. In works of art, Kali usually appears naked, her long, blood-red tongue hanging out, a garland of skulls around her neck. She was given her fierce form to slay demons (these can be understood as outer or inner demons). She helps her devotees come to terms with the reality of death.

## GOOD DEATHS

- ◇ The ability to concentrate the mind on the divine (for most Hindus, on the deity that they have focused worship on through their lives) is an important part of a good death. This ability to keep a calm and focused mind during death is helped immeasurably by a spiritual practice during one's life.
- ◇ Family, friends, and priests all help the dying individual maintain as much mental equanimity as possible as death approaches. This is why family members and priests can chant mantras, the names of the deity, or passages from texts that emphasize the immortality of the soul in the presence of the dying loved one.
- ◇ Followers of Shiva often recite a prayer that asks for immortality and for a peaceful, painless death: "We worship ... Lord Shiva, who enhances prosperity. May he liberate us from death like a ripe fruit separating effortlessly from its vine and not withhold immortality."
- ◇ So we can see how all of the senses are engaged in a good Hindu death: The sacred sounds of the chants, the aroma of incense, and the connection with the deity all combine to move the consciousness of the individual to the divine.

## DEATH RITUAL

- ◇ In Hinduism, a human life is divided into four stages, or *ashramas*: student, householder, forest dweller, and renunciate, or wandering ascetic. The forest-dweller stage, somewhat akin to retirement, marks a withdrawal from family and business life and a turn toward spiritual pursuits. The wandering ascetic stage is one of giving up all attachments, even one's home.
- ◇ The life of a Hindu can be subdivided into many smaller passages that are marked by rituals known as *samskaras*. The death ritual is known as *ant्येष्टि*, which means "final sacrifice."

- ◇ After death, Hindus generally do not embalm or attempt to preserve the body. The corpse is put on the floor or ground, where it is then purified and prepared for its journey. This involves bathing the body, pouring refined butter (ghee) in to the mouth, wrapping the body in cloth, adorning it with flowers, and anointing it with sandalwood paste.
- ◇ The body is placed on a stretcher made of bamboo or rope and carried on the shoulders of family members to the cremation ground, often by a river and preferably by the Ganges.
- ◇ The procession, which involves the chanting of mantras, is led by the oldest son, who takes the lead in all of the death rituals. Among some Hindu communities, women are not supposed to go to the cremation site itself, but rather remain home.
- ◇ Cremation occurs as soon as possible after the death, ideally the same day, but if that's not possible, the following day. Among the tasks accomplished by cremation and the rituals that precede and follow it are purification of the body, the release of the soul from the body, and, if moksha has not been attained, the creation of another body to provide for the passage into the next realm and, ultimately, rebirth.
- ◇ The new body begins to form thanks to the material offerings of *pindas*, balls of rice and milk, over the course of 10–13 days. As the scholar of Hinduism Mark Elmore writes, this offering “is the fundamental rite that establishes the reciprocal relationship between the living and the dead.”



Nepalese funeral pyre

- ◇ The cremation itself is often performed by specialists from the Dom caste, people who are considered Dalits (“an oppressed caste”). The Doms build the funeral pyre (ideally, using sandalwood) and place the corpse on it, with the feet facing south (toward Yama, the Lord of Death). The eldest son, in many cases with his head shaved and wearing white, walks around the body three times and then lights the fire.
- ◇ The soul is generally believed to exit the body from a point on the top of the head (the *brahmarandhra*, or “brahma gap”), and this release can be facilitated by cracking the skull open with a bamboo stick. This job also belongs to the eldest son.
- ◇ After the cremation, mourners then take a bath in the river to conclude the ritual. Bathing is a way to cleanse oneself from the impurity and danger associated with death. This period of pollution closes with a ritual feast for family and friends at the home of the deceased.
- ◇ While most Hindus are cremated, there are some kinds of dead bodies that are prohibited from being burned, and are thus thrown into a nearby river or buried instead. Some are people who die of particular diseases, such as leprosy and smallpox.
- ◇ Children under five are not cremated because, according to some Hindus, their souls are pure and do not need the purifying rituals of cremation. In addition, holy people are often buried, as they have purified themselves, and so need no additional purification from the cremation fire. Some renunciates are buried sitting up in the lotus posture.

## SUGGESTED READING

Allen, “On Death and After in Brahmanic Hindu India.”

Elmore, “Contemporary Hindu Approaches to Death.”

Rambachan, “Like a Ripe Fruit Separating Effortlessly from Its Vine.”

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 How do Hindus understand the nature of liberation and the relation of the soul to the absolute?
- 2 According to the *Bhagavad Gita*, what paths lead Hindus to liberation?
- 3 What are the differences between the understanding of death given in the Upanishads and those found in the earlier Vedic hymns?
- 4 What deities are most closely associated with death, and why?
- 5 What is the significance of the city of Varanasi in the Hindu tradition?



# BUDDHISM ON IMPERMANENCE AND MINDFULNESS

**T**he prince at the center of the founding of Buddhism is Siddhartha Gautama, later known to the world as the Buddha. He left his palace home at 29 and encountered an old man, an ill man, and a corpse. Having never before encountered old age, illness, or death in his sheltered life, Siddhartha was shocked and disturbed by what he saw. He became focused on finding a path to be free from suffering in the midst of life itself. This lecture focuses on what the Buddha discovered, particularly the teachings that are most relevant to the subject of death.

## THE AWAKENING

- ◇ Siddhartha's awakening (the title *Buddha* means “awakened one”) was a realization of the nature and cause of suffering and the way out. In his very first teaching, he put his discovery in terms that would become the most well-known formulation of Buddhist thought—the Four Noble Truths.
  - The first of these truths is what we already know: Life, as we ordinarily live it, is characterized by suffering, anxiety and dissatisfaction. The word for this is *dukkha*.
  - The second noble truth teaches that there is a cause to *dukkha*. The cause is the mind's grasping and attachment. Since everything is impermanent, the quest for what is permanent is bound to fail, and will itself be the source of suffering. The key is to stop holding on.
  - The third noble truth is that the cessation of *dukkha*, the extinguishing of greed and anger, is possible. The experience of this is what is known as *nirvana*.

- The fourth noble truth shows us the path to this freedom: the Eightfold Path, a set of behaviors that will help to extinguish *dukkha*.
- ◇ This Eightfold Path can be divided into three categories: right thought (understanding what the Buddha taught); right ethics and conduct; and right meditation, which means cultivating the mind to overcome negative mental habits.
  - ◇ In addition to *dukkha* and impermanence, Buddhists describe a third characteristic of reality: *anatman*, or no-self. This stands in contrast with *atman* in Hinduism, where once one realizes one's true identity as *atman*, one is freed from identification with the impermanent, suffering body and mind. The Buddha rejected this solution. He taught that meditation reveals something else.
  - ◇ Unlike *absorption meditation*, which shuts out the world, the Buddha developed what we call *mindfulness meditation*, a way of looking deeply and clearly at the world rather than shutting it out. It allows the meditator to observe calmly, without judgment, all phenomena that arise both within one's mind (thoughts, emotions, memories) and in the outside world (all of the sensations that bombard us daily). One learns to observe these phenomena *without* getting attached to them. They arise, and then pass, so one directly experiences the truth of impermanence.
  - ◇ And here is where we get to the truth of no-self: The Buddha taught that when we look deeply, we find that no stable, unchanging self exists. Rather than a stable, enduring, separate self, we are a dynamic series of processes in an ongoing interdependent relationship with the world.
  - ◇ The concepts of *dukkha*, impermanence, and no-self, along with the notion of liberation and the meditative path to realizing it, are the keys to understanding the Buddhist approach to death.

## DEATH AND REBIRTH

- ◇ Like Hindus, Buddhists believe in *samsara*—the cycle of death and rebirth—and that *samsara* is driven by karma. Buddhists generally believe that there are six possible realms of rebirth. One of these is the human realm.
- ◇ Just below us is the realm of the animals, whose lives are largely concerned with survival. Below them is the realm of the hungry ghosts, who are portrayed with large bellies but tiny mouths and throats, ensuring that they will be perpetually unsatisfied. At the lowest level are the hell realms, where those who have done the most evil are tormented.

*Hungry Ghosts Scroll*



- ◇ Above the human realm are two other realms. The lower of these is the realm of beings called *ashuras*, sometimes conceived as demi-gods or titans, deities who contend with each other and struggle with envy and desire for power. Their lives are certainly not peaceful. At the highest realm are the *devas*, the contented deities who live blissfully.

- ◇ All of these realms are temporary. While some Buddhists might aspire to a better rebirth on the wheel of life—a more comfortable human being, or a contented deva—the ultimate goal is to get off of the cycle altogether and attain nirvana.
- ◇ While some Buddhists see these realms as actual places, others see them in a more psychological and metaphorical way. In the course of a single day, we can move from a heavenly realm, as we eat a delicious meal or get some great news, to a hellish realm as some tragedy befalls us. In other words, rebirth can be seen as going on all the time.
- ◇ One way to think of our lives is as *continuity without identity*. There is a chain of continuity—a karmic chain of causes and conditions—that leads from the infant person, to the adolescent person, to the adult person. When the person dies, the karmic inheritance from their life gives rise to a new being. But through it all, there is no unchanging, enduring element.



## MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

- ◇ The Buddha gave a detailed account of mindfulness meditation. The basic approach is to sit in a stable posture (many monks sit in the Lotus Posture or some variation) and observe the movement of your breath as it comes into and out of your body.
- ◇ As you try to keep your attention on the breath, a flood of thoughts, memories, plans, and anxieties will demand and often carry off your attention. With a great deal of practice, however, you will learn to observe all of these things without clinging to them and return your attention to the breath.
- ◇ In the Satipatthana Sutra (the Foundations of Mindfulness), the Buddha has a group of monks—*bhikkhus* in the Pali language of the earliest recorded sutras—direct their awareness at a decomposing corpse.
- ◇ The Buddha taught that there were important lessons in the close observation of a decaying corpse. He said,

Bhikkhus, just as a bhikku sees a body dead one, two or three days, swollen, blue and festering, thrown on to the cemetery, so he applies this perception to his own body thus: Verily, my own body too, is of the same nature; such it will become and will not escape it.

- ◇ Why does mindfulness meditation work? First, it shows us that most, if not all, of our suffering is self-inflicted. The regrets over past mistakes, the fears about the future, the anger and frustration over our failures, and so many other painful aspects of our lives are produced by the mind. If the mind can be transformed, the suffering will end.
- ◇ Bringing the mind back to the present moment, the experience of the body and breath, and being able to observe from the stable platform of centered awareness diminishes the power of the negative thoughts and emotions.
- ◇ While we can aim to make things better, of course, we must start from recognition of reality, an acceptance of the way things are. Some things cannot be avoided. Foremost among them is death.

## MINDFULNESS AND DYING

- ◇ We can now see how Buddhist mindfulness practice can be brought to the experience of dying. When some people are asked how they want to die, they answer, “In my sleep.”
- ◇ While this is certainly preferable to a painful, difficult death, it is not the ideal from the Buddhist perspective. The ideal would be to die consciously, with full awareness. Buddhists focus on the impermanence of all phenomena, and death is the most powerful teacher of impermanence.
- ◇ This is why the Buddhist tradition reminds us regularly, with a variety of death meditations, that we are going to die. One chant, entitled “Five Subjects for Frequent Recollection,” contains the words, “I am of the nature to die. I have not gone beyond dying. All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will become separated from me.”
- ◇ The aim at the time of death is this: Don’t think about some possible afterlife; don’t worry about what will happen to others after you die; don’t go back over how you lived your life. Just directly attend to the dying process.
- ◇ This is very different from the idea of “conquering” death we so often encounter. In fact, as the Thai meditation master Ajahn Chah noted, “Even the Buddha himself, with his great store of accumulated virtue, could not avoid physical death.”
- ◇ Author and poet Stephen Levine, who has worked with the sick and dying for many years, presents the Buddhist perspective on death in an accessible way in his book, *Who Dies? An Investigation of Conscious Living and Conscious Dying*. He reminds us that our task in the dying process is the same as it has been all along—to be fully aware, in a non-clinging way, to each moment as it arises. He writes, “To let go of the last moment and open to the next is to die consciously moment to moment.”
- ◇ The great Japanese poet Basho said, “From olden times it has been customary to leave behind a death-poem, and perhaps I should do the same. But every moment of life is the last, every poem a death poem!” So

whether we're talking about the unfolding of our lives or the experience of our deaths, Levine's advice is the same: "Become one with the process."

- ◇ Buddhist masters serve as examples of how one dies in awareness by making their deaths a teaching. One story is told about the death of Zen master Roshi Taji: When Roshi Taji was close to death, a disciple brought him a cake.
- ◇ As Roshi Taji ate, he began to look worse. His disciples asked for his final words. His response: "My, but this cake is delicious!" Even in the face of imminent death, he lived each moment fully. His last words, rather than being an attempt to utter some profundity, were an expression of his being completely present to the experience of tasting. The ephemeral nature of life, when completely embraced, heightens our experience.

## SUGGESTED READING

Chah, "Our Real Home."

Goss and Klass, "Buddhisms and Death."

Hamilton, ed., *The Art of Dying*.

Levine, *Who Dies?*

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 In what ways does mindfulness meditation help one prepare to die?
- 2 What is the relationship of the doctrine of no-self in Buddhism to Buddhist attitudes toward death?
- 3 What is your view of the Buddhist understanding of no-self?

# THE PROCESS OF DYING IN TIBETAN BUDDHISM

**W**e've focused previously on some aspects of Buddhist teachings that are relevant to how we face death—the focus on impermanence, suffering, and no-self, and the practice of mindfulness meditation. However, Buddhism, like Hinduism and other Indian religions, features the notion of *samsara*—the continuing cycle of death and rebirth. In this lecture, we will focus on the rebirth process in Buddhism, and in particular, the form of Buddhism that has the deepest and most extensive teachings on the actual process of death and rebirth: Tibetan Buddhism.

## TWO STORIES

- ◇ Let's consider a couple of stories that some people see as evidence for rebirth. Kamaljit Kour was a girl who lived in the Punjab in India. When she was walking with her father one day, she suddenly asked him to take her to a village far away. She said that she had died—hit by a bus—and now insisted on being taken to the village where she had lived.
- ◇ Her father was disturbed, but ultimately took her. When they got there, she directed her father to the house where she said she had lived. On the way, her father asked some neighbors if they knew of a family who had lost a daughter in the way Kamaljit described.
- ◇ They confirmed that just such a thing had happened, and that a girl named Rishma had died. When Kamaljit and her father finally met Rishma's family, she knew all of their names. Kamaljit then requested a number of items that she said had belonged to her, and Rishma's family confirmed that all of these items were in the house.



- ◇ There is also the case of Parmod Sharma, from the 1940s. As a toddler, Parmod began to tell his mother that she didn't have to cook because he had a wife who could cook. He told her that he was one of the "Mohan Brothers," that he had a biscuit shop in Moradabad, and that he had died in a bathtub.
- ◇ News began to spread about this boy's strange story until it reached the city of Moradabad where the members of a family who owned—yes—the Mohan Brothers Biscuit Shop heard it. Eventually, Parmod and his father went to the city where the boy recognized members of his previous family and various locations in the area.
- ◇ In surveys since the early 1980s, the percentage of Americans who indicate a belief in reincarnation has remained right around 25 percent. Those who believe in reincarnation can find many stories like Kamaljit Kour's and Parmod Sharma's to support their belief.
- ◇ Many others, however, will be skeptical of such stories, and critics have sought alternative explanations. Dr. Ian Stevenson, who was a psychiatry professor at the University of Virginia, personally investigated many such cases. He published his findings in a book entitled *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* in 1966.
- ◇ His use of the term *suggestive* in the title indicates that he did not believe that these cases provided a definitive proof of reincarnation. He strongly believed, however, that they warranted further study and careful consideration.

## TIBETAN BUDDHIST VIEWS

- ◇ For Tibetan Buddhists, there are different levels of our being, what can be labeled the *three bodies*: the gross body (the physical form), the subtle body (which can be thought of as an "energy body"), and the extremely subtle level, the deepest level of which is the level of pure awareness, which Tibetans call *the mind of clear light*.

- ◇ Tibetan Buddhists see our lives as a series of “in-betweens,” known as *bardos*. Certain in-betweens are highly charged junctures, transition states that are intensified opportunities to see the true nature of reality and become liberated.
- ◇ We possess a number of “borderland” states of consciousness. The transition between wakefulness and sleep is known as the *hypnagogic state*, and odd mental experiences can occur here. Between the states of dreamless sleep and waking lies the *dream bardo*.
- ◇ These transitional, border states of consciousness can reveal the nature of our minds to us if we learn to observe them properly (which, as you can imagine, is quite difficult). To do this with dreams, for instance, Tibetans developed a practice called *dream yoga*, which is related to what scientists in the West call *lucid dreaming*.
- ◇ A central teaching of Buddhism is that we do not see our waking reality for what it actually is, any more than we see our dreams for what they really are when we’re having them. Our so-called ordinary reality occupies a similar status as the dream reality. You might object that in the dream reality, things are being constructed by the mind. But isn’t this also the case with our waking reality, at least at a certain level?
- ◇ We have been focused on the wake/dream/sleep realm of consciousness. But there are other non-ordinary states that exist across borders of our consciousness, and exploring these can result in spiritual insight and progress. These include experiences like states of meditation, fainting, sneezing, and orgasm. Many Tibetan Buddhist practices involve maintaining awareness across the thresholds of these mind states.

## THE *BARDO THODOL*

- ◇ The borders between life, death, and rebirth are like those between other states. The Tibetan practices surrounding the dying experience, therefore, focus on maintaining awareness and understanding the true nature of

mind amidst the experiences of the *bardo* states between life and death, and death and rebirth.

- ◇ The guidebook for this journey through death is the *Bardo Thodol*, the book of “*Liberation Through Hearing in the Bardo State*,” also known as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.
- ◇ The *Bardo Thodol* is a text that is read at the bedside of a person who is dying; it is read regularly for 49 days after death. (While there are exceptions, most people are expected to experience the bardo states between one life and the next for seven cycles of seven days each—49 days.)
- ◇ Initially, the reading is done in the presence of the corpse. After the body is disposed of, it can be done where the person died, or near the deceased’s favorite places to sit during life, as this is where their consciousness will linger.
- ◇ Ideally, the reader of the *Bardo Thodol* should be a knowledgeable teacher with high spiritual attainment. But it can also be read by a fellow practitioner in the lineage. Since it can be difficult to determine the exact moment of death, the reader often begins when death is imminent.
- ◇ The reading of the *Bardo Thodol* is meant to decrease fear and confusion, to provide clarity about the process, and to result ideally in liberation, or at least a favorable rebirth. The deceased must recognize that the beings encountered in the bardo are just manifestations of the mind.
- ◇ In death, one becomes a *bardowa*, a “bardo being” with a type of illusory body similar to the body one has in dreams. Bardowas often do not initially realize they are dead and exist in a state of denial, which the *Bardo Thodol* tries to shake them out of.
- ◇ In the first phases of the *bardo* journey, the person is visited by visions of buddhas and bodhisattvas who will help them. The reader describes these beings in great detail and instructs the person to engage in devotional practices that will help them find liberation.

- ◇ If, after all of the helpful beings are encountered, the person still has not achieved liberation, then wrathful, terrifying beings appear, manifestations of the defilements of the mind. The reader reminds the deceased not to be frightened.
- ◇ While in the *bardo* state, the deceased often want to return to their ordinary life. The reader tells the *bardowa*: “Do not be attached to your relatives, friends and loved ones, for they can no longer help you.”
- ◇ In the final part of the journey through the *bardos*, the individual who has not identified the clear light of awareness as their own essence is headed toward rebirth. The person can still avoid it by, as the text advises, “closing the womb door.” They will see males and females in sexual union.
- ◇ The ideal is to avoid rebirth, but if one cannot avoid it, one’s consciousness is drawn to the couple who will be one’s parents in the next rebirth. We sometimes say that we don’t choose our parents, but there is a sense in Tibetan Buddhism that we do just that.
- ◇ If rebirth is inevitable, the ideal is to be reborn compassionately. The *Bardo Thodol* advises the individual to generate the thought,

I wish to take rebirth in the human realm in order to be of great benefit to others. For this reason I will choose rebirth in a body endowed with great merit ... or as the son of spiritual teachers, tantric adepts ... or at least people of great spiritual enthusiasm.

## BODHISATTVAS

- ◇ The ultimate goal in Buddhism is to attain liberation from samsara. And yet, there are beings who *could* attain final Buddhahood but make a compassionate choice to be reborn as humans. These are bodhisattvas, and they take a vow to delay their final liberation from samsara until all beings are liberated.



Tenzin Gyatso, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama

- ◇ The Dalai Lama is the most well-known example of a living bodhisattva. He is said to be the bodhisattva of compassion. The current Dalai Lama is Tenzin Gyatso, the 14<sup>th</sup> in this line. He is the spiritual leader of Tibet (and was formerly the temporal leader as well, until he voluntarily gave up that role a few years ago to an elected *Sikyong*, or prime minister, of the Tibetan government-in-exile).
- ◇ The Dalai Lama's spiritual lineage stretches back 600 years, although the title is not handed down through blood, but is said to pass via reincarnation. When the previous Dalai Lama dies, the new young reborn Dalai Lama must be found by other lamas and then trained in philosophy, ritual, meditation and many other realms of knowledge and practice.
- ◇ These beings who come back for a specific purpose are known as *tulkus*, which means "manifestation bodies or forms." The Dalai Lama is a *tulku* who is a manifestation of a bodhisattva.

- ◇ Given the current political situation in Tibet, the future of the lineage of Dalai Lamas has come into question. As the Chinese government now has direct control over Tibet, many Tibetans are concerned that when the Dalai Lama dies, the Chinese government will try to control the selection process and install a Dalai Lama who would answer to them.
- ◇ This is what actually happened in the case of the second highest-ranking *tulku* in Tibet, the Panchen Lama. After the committee of lamas, including the Dalai Lama, announced that the reborn Panchen Lama had been found, that six-year-old boy vanished into the custody of the Chinese government, which then named their own Panchen Lama.
- ◇ The Dalai Lama has recently said that his next rebirth may take place outside of Tibet (and thus beyond Chinese control). He has also said that the system of selection by rebirth may have served its purpose and run its course. The position of Dalai Lama, like the *tulku* system in general, has always been shaped by a combination of religious and political factors, and its future remains uncertain.

## SUGGESTED READING

Gehlek, *Good Life, Good Death*.

Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*.

Stevenson, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*.

Thurman, trans., *The Tibetan Book of Dead*.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 Do you find the accounts of people with past life memory convincing?
- 2 How does a belief in rebirth affect a person's attitude toward life?
- 3 What role does the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* play in the dying process?
- 4 Does the Tibetan understanding of life as a series of "in-betweens" provide a helpful or illuminating perspective on life?
- 5 What is the relationship between "dream yoga" (lucid dreaming) and dying?

# CONFUCIAN REMEMBRANCE, DAOIST FORGETTING

**T**he foundational classical texts of the two most important indigenous traditions of China—Confucianism and Daoism—do not pay much attention at all to the question of post-death existence. The focus is almost entirely on *this* world. It is worth looking closely at how Chinese thinkers find meaning and consolation in the face of finitude without recourse to personal survival of death. This lecture focuses on two of the most influential thinkers who lived during the “golden age” of Chinese thought, the classical period of 6<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries B.C.E.: Confucius and Zhuangzi.

## CONFUCIAN THOUGHT

- ◇ Confucian thought has profoundly shaped the cultures of East Asia. (*Confucius* is the Latinized name for Master Kong, or Kong Fuzi.) As was the case with other world-transforming figures like Socrates and Jesus, Confucius himself did not physically write the texts attributed to him.
- ◇ Rather, he gave oral teachings that were then written down by his disciples and collected into a small book called the *Lun Yu*, or *Analects of Confucius*. Unlike most religious texts, the *Analects of Confucius* indicates no belief in personal immortality or anything like rebirth.
- ◇ However, Confucius does talk about death frequently in the *Analects*. But he talks *only* about how death intersects with our *lives*—namely, how we should react to the death of others, and how we should die when our time comes.



- ◇ The Confucian tradition focuses on the cultivation of virtuous human beings for the sake of creating a harmonious, well-ordered and flourishing society. Confucius created a program of education designed to develop essential human virtues through learning, the arts, athletics and ritual.
- ◇ In contrast to a common view of the self in the West as a separate, rational, autonomous agent, the Confucian view is that the self is a nexus of relationships. We are who we are because of whom we have lived with, loved, and learned from.



## CONFUCIUS AND DEATH

- ◇ Confucius believed that because the expression of grief at the death of loved ones is so important, the activity of mourning is different from other ritual forms. The importance of grief and mourning for Confucius was evidenced by the way he treated those who are in mourning. One passage from the *Analects* states, “When eating in the presence of one who had been bereaved, the Master never ate his fill.”
- ◇ Another passage says that Confucius always took on a solemn expression around someone in mourning, and that when he passed a person in mourning, “he would lean forward with his hands on the cross-bar of his carriage to show respect.”
- ◇ Many powerful emotions are present for the mourners at a funeral. These might include not only emotions like sadness, loneliness, fear, regret, and anger, but also positive emotions like a joyful, if wistful, appreciation of the person’s life, along with gratitude and humor. An effective ritual is able to make a place for conflicting emotions, allowing them to be expressed and brought together in a harmonious way.

- ◇ One particularly interesting practice is placing broken objects in the grave, which, the Confucian thinker Xunzi says, symbolize that the deceased “has changed his dwelling.” We can recognize this as a “tie-breaking” ritual, which allows the mourners to both recognize the things that were important to the deceased *and* acknowledge that the loved one will no longer be using them. The effortful, physical action of breaking an object—like that of shoveling dirt into a grave—can function to facilitate acceptance of the loss.
- ◇ In Confucian thought, the death of a loved one may be a sad event whenever it occurs, but it is not necessarily a tragic event. People who live until old age and die a natural death are not victims of a tragic fate. The deathbed scenes presented in the *Analects* show examples of dying people accepting their fate with equanimity.
- ◇ Confucian thought has shaped the way that the Chinese have related to their dead for over two millennia. In popular Chinese belief, the well-being of the dead is ensured by the proper ritual performance by the descendants, which means that a link between the living and the dead is maintained long after death has occurred.

## ZHUANGZI

- ◇ The 4<sup>th</sup>-century B.C.E. Daoist thinker known as Master Zhuang, or Zhuangzi, was one of those rare individuals whose radical, provocative vision causes us to reevaluate our most fundamental beliefs and values.
- ◇ Coming to terms with change and mortality is a central aspect of Zhuangzi’s vision. Zhuangzi believed that most, if not all, human suffering is self-inflicted, and that changing the way we look at the world allows us to move “freely and easily” through the world.
- ◇ He recognizes that both the prospect of our own deaths and those of loved ones produce fear and grief in people, which, in his view, lead to a great amount of avoidable human suffering.

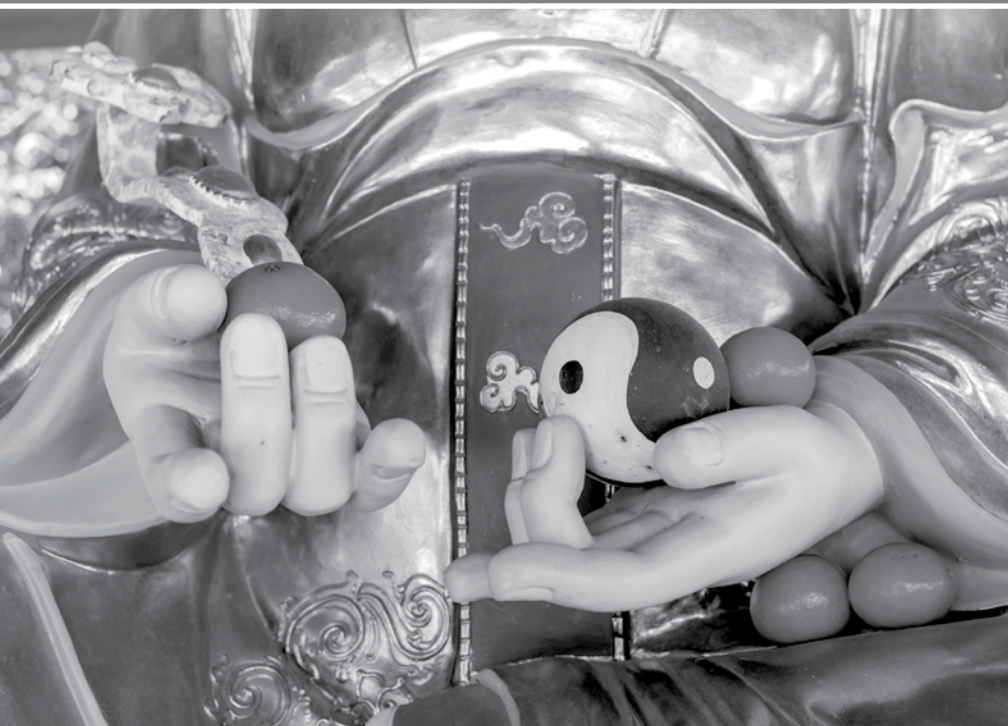
- ◇ One of the most prominent themes in Zhuangzi's thought is skepticism. He is skeptical about our senses and beliefs, the ability of language to reflect reality, and about the objectivity of our judgments of right and wrong. Zhuangzi applies this same skepticism to our common assumptions about life and death: "How do I know that loving life is not a delusion? How do I know that in hating death I am not like a man who, having left home in his youth, has forgotten the way back?"
- ◇ Zhuangzi describes the world as characterized by ceaseless transformation: "Decay, growth, fullness, and emptiness end and then begin again." Given this, Zhuangzi advises us to "follow along" with change, preserve equanimity, and make the mind "free-flowing."
- ◇ Going along with the transformation of things at its most radical involves accepting severe illness, mutilation, and death. In one passage, a man known as Master Yu suddenly falls ill and becomes deformed, yet remains "calm and unconcerned," expressing only wonder at the new shapes his body is taking.

## THE DAO

- ◇ One of the most important elements of the Daoist worldview is the belief that the world is governed by the movement of the *Dao*, the pulse underlying nature's rhythms. The ultimate goal is to live in harmony with the Dao, moving effortlessly with its currents rather than struggling against it. Zhuangzi shows that the self, which is a construct of the mind, is one of the primary obstacles to harmony with the Dao.
- ◇ One who has forgotten oneself is also freed from the fear of death. We have nothing to lose when we die and thus nothing to fear from death.
- ◇ How can we rid ourselves of these remarkably ingrained habits of the mind, the concepts and categories that we have internalized over a lifetime? First, one can do it through being exposed, as listener or reader, to language skillfully designed to move one in certain ways. Zhuangzi also alludes to meditative techniques—such as "sitting in forgetfulness"—and absorption in skillful activities, where one loses oneself in one's experience.

## ZHUANGZI AND DEATH

- ◇ Confucian thinkers believe that it is a natural human response to feel deep sadness at the death of a loved one. Zhuangzi's perspective is profoundly different. For Zhuangzi, grief and sadness only show that one's mind is still prey to the kinds of attachments that disturb equanimity and make true freedom impossible.
- ◇ Likewise, to the dying individual, death is simply a process of change, a process to which we must yield. Loved ones who cannot accept this transformation with equanimity will be a disruptive element in the dying process and should be kept away from the deathbed.
- ◇ Achieving acceptance of change as Zhuangzi advised requires an understanding of the Dao, the pulse of nature. The movement of the Dao involves alternations of two great forces—yin and yang, night and day, dark and light, and ultimately life and death.



- ◇ Zhuangzi came to terms with the death of his own wife by seeing it as part of a larger unfolding of natural processes. Zhuangzi employs a “cosmic” perspective that sees the coming to be and passing away of his wife as manifestations of a larger, ongoing process of formation and dissolution. Resisting or lamenting any transformation, Zhuangzi tells us, indicates a lack of understanding.
- ◇ Zhuangzi shows that those who live in accordance with the Dao know how to stay out of harm’s way. For Zhuangzi, any *natural* death is to be accepted. Insofar as possible, however, one does not let the desires of one’s self-centered mind—desires such as power, wealth, and status—put oneself in danger of an *unnatural* death.

## DIFFERENCES

- ◇ One reason that Confucius and Zhuangzi have such different approaches to questions of life and death is because they see human life unfolding through time in very different ways. The Confucian notion of temporality sees human life in terms of narratives. A life unfolds in stages, which are marked by rites of passage, with birth and death as the primary “bookends.”
- ◇ These endpoints, however, must be understood as ellipses rather than periods, for one’s life trajectory continues after death via one’s descendants just as one’s narrative can be traced back to one’s ancestors. In other words, your own life narrative is embedded in the larger narratives of family and clan.
- ◇ Contrast this with Zhuangzi’s understanding of temporality. According to Zhuangzi, all narratives are artificial. They are overlays, constructed on top of, and often obstructing, what is actually there: a ceaseless flow of life that can be experienced in its immediacy at any time. Social conventions, abstract categories, and constructed narratives serve to cover up our connection with the Dao.

- ◇ The implications of these models can be clearly illustrated by looking at these thinkers' dramatically divergent responses to premature death. Whereas the premature death of a good person is a great tragedy for Confucians, Zhuangzi says that, "Although one may have a long life or a premature death, there's not much difference between them." An *unnatural* death is to be avoided if possible. But without a narrative conception of temporality, there is no conception of unrealized promise or an under-lived life.
- ◇ We can see an illuminating illustration of the two very different approaches to death by looking at Confucius's and Zhuangzi's own dying experiences.
- ◇ Confucius's disciples wanted to accompany him, but he emphasized the importance of being surrounded by one's friends at death. Despite all of the emphasis placed in the *Analects* on formalities and titles, at this crucial moment in one's life, the benefits of rank do not provide comfort or meaning. The best way to leave this world is with those who have made life meaningful by your side.
- ◇ As with Confucius, Zhuangzi's disciples wanted to give him a lavish send-off. Zhuangzi playfully mocked those who put so much emphasis on proper burial accoutrements, like a sumptuous coffin covered in jade and pearls. He said that preferring burial over being left to rot is just discriminating against one group of animals that would devour his corpse in favor of another.
- ◇ In his poem "Ash Wednesday," T. S. Eliot writes, "Teach us to care and not to care." This is another way to approach the divide between the Confucians and Zhuangzi. The Confucians teach us to care, to take things seriously. Zhuangzi teaches us not to care, to take things lightly. Both perspectives are important in our lives.

## SUGGESTED READING

Berkson, “Death in the *Zhuangzi*.”

———, “Xunzi’s Reinterpretation of Ritual.”

Ivanhoe and Olberding, ed., *Mortality in Ancient Chinese Thought*.

Moreman, *Beyond the Threshold* (chapter 7, “Chinese Religions”).

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 How can someone find a balance in life between Confucian remembering and Zhuangzian forgetting?
- 2 Is it possible for human beings to attain the complete acceptance of death as just another transformation, as shown by Zhuangzi’s sages?
- 3 How do Confucian thinkers demonstrate the importance of ritual in coming to terms with the death of loved ones?

# DEATH AND SYNCRETISM IN CHINA

**I**n China, while there are priests and monks affiliated with a single tradition, most laypeople do not limit themselves in such a way. They engage in a variety of practices connected with the Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist traditions, along with other practices that fall under the umbrella of folk religion. The way that all of these traditions shape Chinese attitudes and practices regarding death offers a unique perspective on the nature of the human relationship with mortality. This lecture explores them.

## GODS

- ◇ We'll begin with a look at Chinese traditions involving worship or relations with the supernatural world. Three types of beings are prominent: gods, ancestors, and ghosts.
- ◇ First, the gods. The Chinese people have traditionally seen the spirit realm as organized in a great celestial bureaucracy. Each level of this bureaucracy has a certain god (or *shen*) in charge. At the most local level, the familial level, is the kitchen god. He watches over the family and also reports back up the celestial ladder.
- ◇ Above the kitchen god in the hierarchy is the earth god, who watches over a local village, and the city god, whose jurisdiction is wider still. At the top of the pyramid is the divine figure of the Jade Emperor. Most people would not focus their prayers on him any more than most Americans would take their political concerns straight to the president.



- ◇ In addition to the celestial bureaucracy, there are many other deities in the Chinese pantheon, including Guan Di, a god of war; Mazu, a heavenly mother; various deities from the Daoist tradition; and buddhas and bodhisattvas from the Buddhist tradition. In China, the notion that a person can become a deity—known as apotheosis—is quite common.

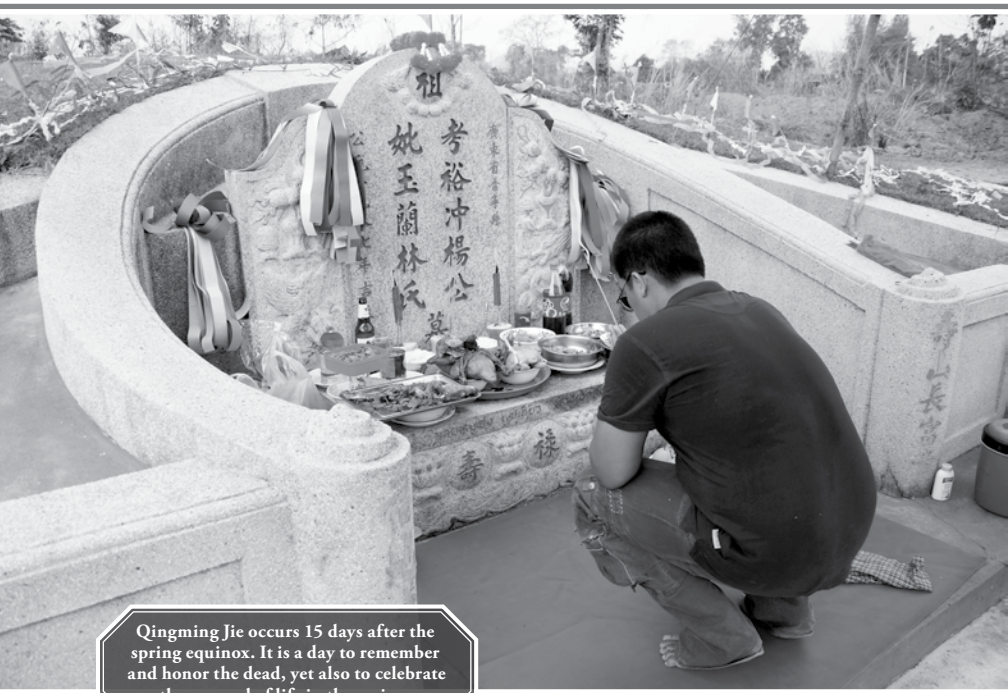
## ANCESTORS

- ◇ One of the oldest known religious practices of the Chinese people centers on relationships with ancestors. Ancestors are the objects of veneration and the receivers of ritual offerings. In most Chinese homes, there is an altar with images of the most recent generations of ancestors. Generally speaking, the focus within a family is on the previous two generations of ancestors, as well as very important figures of the lineage.

In many parts of rural China and Taiwan, people burn incense in the kitchen, just outside their door, and on a home altar, corresponding to the kitchen god, ghosts, and ancestors, respectively.



- ◇ Ancestors are informed when there is significant news in the family, and they are consulted and asked for permission when important decisions have to be made. On Qingming Jie (“Clear and Bright Festival”), also known as Grave Sweeping Day, families visit their ancestral gravesites to clean them and to make offerings of food, wine, incense, flowers, special currency for the dead, and so on.



Qingming Jie occurs 15 days after the spring equinox. It is a day to remember and honor the dead, yet also to celebrate the renewal of life in the spring.

## GHOSTS

- ◇ The third type of supernatural being is the ghost (or *gui*). Some ghosts are neglected ancestors—the dead who have no one to take care of them and prey on the living.

- ◇ People who want to avoid being a victim of ghosts will make offerings to them outside of the home—some food, perhaps some cigarettes or beer, and sometimes a basin of water and a towel so they can wash up. People will also defend against ghosts with various charms and amulets, by placing guardian spirit figures at entrances to important buildings, like temples, and driving them away using firecrackers.
- ◇ A particular ritual connected with ghosts is what is known as “ghost marriage”: If a woman died unmarried, in some cases, a family would put a small bag or purse at the side of the road with the girl’s name and horoscope in it. Whatever man picked it up would receive a small dowry from the family and, in return, the deceased woman would be worshipped in his ancestral line.
- ◇ The seventh month of the Chinese lunar calendar is considered a time when the line between the realms of the living and the dead is most permeable, and for this reason, some people throughout East Asia avoid undertaking new ventures, getting married, having surgery, or even walking late at night during this month.
- ◇ The 15<sup>th</sup> day of the month is known as the Ghost Festival, when the dead return to visit the land of the living. In some ways, it is analogous to Halloween. People make offerings to the dead in order to ease their suffering, and often leave seats empty at the table for them.

## AFTER DEATH

- ◇ Most Chinese people believe that we have at least two souls, and these two are further subdivided by many people.
- ◇ In Daoist thought, as we’ve seen, the cosmos is divided into the complementary forces of yin and yang. The soul also has its yin and yang aspects, namely *po* (the yin) and *hun*, or *linghun* (the yang). The *po* is associated with earth, with the realm of the material; the *hun* with heaven, with the spirit realm. Humans are often said to have three *hun* and seven *po*.

- ◇ So, what happens after death? Some believe that the soul (generally thought to be the *hun* soul) is met by a local deity (such as the city god) or his officials. This being or group of beings accompanies the soul to the underworld.
- ◇ What is this underworld like? In some accounts, it is somewhat like Hades, a land of the shades. It has been described as a “mirror image” of the world of the living, almost like a yin dimension to our world’s yang dimension.
- ◇ People want their departed loved ones to live as comfortable and enjoyable a life as possible there. People can send their deceased relatives cash (spirit money), houses, cars, televisions, and even cell phones, all of them crafted—sometimes exquisitely—out of paper.
- ◇ In another account of post-death existence, the soul passes through a series of courts to be judged by an efficient judicial arm of the underworld bureaucracy.
- ◇ Some Chinese accounts of the underworld regions where judgment and punishment occur—usually translated as purgatory rather than hell, to highlight their temporary and corrective nature—are graphic, and show punishments fitting crimes in a way reminiscent of Dante’s *Inferno*. The *Yu Li Chao Zhuan* (translated as *The Divine Panorama*) describes punishments like gnawing hunger, burning thirst, being thrown into a cauldron of boiling water, being stretched on a rack, and being pecked by fowls.
- ◇ Some rituals allow surviving loved ones to rescue their at-risk deceased relatives who face judgment in purgatory. In some forms of Daoism, the priest and his acolytes stage a dramatic incursion into hell, enacted through dance and acrobatics. The priest can also send a writ of pardon to the underworld courts.
- ◇ In some cases, the soul may take its place in the spiritual bureaucracy, existing in the realm of the gods. Sometimes the soul lingers around gravesites. This is why prayers and offerings are given at gravesites, particularly on days like Qingming Jie.

- ◇ There is also the possibility of being born directly into what is known as a Buddhist Pure Land through the power of the saving vow of Amida Buddha (also called Amitabha), the Buddha of Infinite Light and Infinite Life. This is the view of the Pure Land tradition, one of the most popular forms of Buddhism in East Asia.
- ◇ What seems at first glance like an unsystematic set of conflicting destinations of the dead might be the way that the Chinese have dealt with the contradictory feelings we have toward the dead.

## CHINESE FUNERAL PRACTICES

- ◇ The Chinese have a wide variety of funeral practices based on region, ethnic group, religious traditions, and so on. But there are also common features.
- ◇ In general, there are four main purposes to a Chinese funeral:
  - 1 Providing for the needs of the dead during their afterlife journey and experience
  - 2 Showing respect and love for the dead
  - 3 Guarding the living against the dangers of the dead
  - 4 Helping the mourners through their grief.
- ◇ The rituals start before the death occurs. The dying person is moved to the main hall of the home, closer to the ancestral altar, which he will soon join. The images of deities and ancestors are covered to avoid the contamination of death. After death, the sons and grandsons stay beside the corpse at night, protecting their loved one from “untoward happenings.”
- ◇ A rice bowl is placed at the feet of the corpse to prevent hunger. Family members of the same sex wash the corpse. Coins and jewels are placed in the mouth and hands of the deceased to protect them from evil and, if necessary, to bribe stubborn underworld officials. Paper money and objects are burned to accompany the soul on its journey.

- ◇ A temporary paper tablet is prepared with the name of the deceased and the date of death. This allows the soul to begin to receive prayers and offerings; family members will come before the tablet to offer *ke tou* (prostrations in which the head touches the floor, and the origin of the English word *kowtow*). The tablet will ultimately be replaced by a wooden one, which is placed on the home altar with those of the other ancestors, where it will receive devotion and food offerings.
- ◇ A grand procession featuring family, friends, priests, and musicians accompanies the coffin to its final destination. The location of the grave is determined using *feng shui*, the Chinese practice of situating objects or structures harmoniously within the larger natural environment. The funeral party circumambulates the grave, and then the coffin is sealed while prayers and auspicious recitations are made.
- ◇ The length of the mourning period will depend on how close the relative was. During the initial period of mourning, the closest family members disregard their appearance, wearing simple, coarse clothing of hemp or sack cloth, with unkempt hair and an unshaven face, and eat only simple food. Mourners in China, as elsewhere in East and South Asia, wear white.
- ◇ As in other parts of the world, a second burial is a common practice in many parts of China. The first burial, which involves the corpse, is called the *unlucky burial*. A few years after the death—long enough for the flesh to largely decompose, but usually not more than a dozen years—there is a second burial, or *lucky burial*, wherein the coffin is broken open, the bones are removed, washed of all remaining tissue, and dried, and then properly arranged and placed in an earthenware jar.
- ◇ A *feng shui* expert will determine an auspicious location to rebury the bones, or they will be put in an ancestral shrine or columbarium. There are families in China and Taiwan that specialize in the practice of second burials, which provide mourners with a sense of closure.

## TOMBS AND SOLDIERS

- ◇ One of the most prevalent themes in Chinese death journeys is the significance of the tomb. The most famous tomb in China is the underground complex of the first emperor of unified China, Qin Shihuang.
- ◇ Together with the surrounding underground pits and chambers, this mausoleum is truly a necropolis, a city of the dead, occupying roughly 21 square miles.
- ◇ In 1974, farmers digging a well in the area came upon a life-sized terracotta soldier. Decades later, archaeologists have now uncovered over 2,000 of these soldiers, and they estimate that there is a total of around 8,000.
- ◇ A bit larger than life-size and weighing 300–400 pounds each, every one is unique, with distinctive facial features, wearing the uniform and armor that indicates his rank, and accompanied by weapons, horses and chariots.





- ◇ The mausoleum is laid out as an underground analogue to the capital, and it seems as if the emperor, wanting to continue his reign in the afterlife, constructed a city from which to rule, complete with palaces, temples, rivers of mercury (which was thought to promote longevity), simulated stars in the heavens, and protection from a military.

## SUGGESTED READING

Harrell, "The Concept of the Soul in Chinese Folk Religions."

Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts and Ancestors*.

Weigand, "The Chinese Experience of Death."

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 What accounts for the variety of seemingly contradictory views of the destinations of the soul after death?
- 2 In what ways do Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism all contribute to Chinese views of death?
- 3 What is the significance of the second burial in Chinese death rituals?
- 4 What role do ancestors play in the life of the Chinese?



# SUICIDE EXAMINED

According to statistics from the World Health Organization, there are around one million deaths by suicide worldwide each year, and over 20 million attempted suicides. Suicide rates have increased nearly 60 percent in the last half-century, mostly in the more economically and technologically advanced nations. In the United States in 2013, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there were over 41,000 suicides, making it more than twice as common as homicide. The statistics tell us that it is essential for all of us to learn more about what causes suicide and what we can do about it.

## DEFENSES OF SUICIDE

- ◇ For this lecture, we will set aside the questions of euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide; we'll explore those later. Let's consider for now only adults who are physically healthy (no terminal illness, no unbearable physical pain) and who express a desire to kill themselves.
- ◇ Let's begin considering the argument that we have a right to end our own lives when we want and on our terms. The Stoic philosopher Seneca said that your death is ultimately your business alone.
- ◇ In modern times, another vigorous defense of the right to suicide came from controversial psychiatrist Thomas Szasz. Szasz was guided by libertarian convictions, including a devotion to liberty and personal autonomy. He argued that efforts at suicide prevention—particularly the practice of involuntary commitment—are ultimately forms of social control.

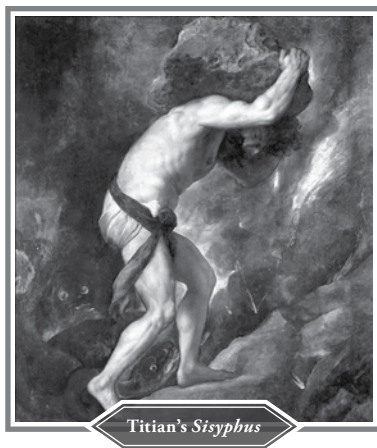
## AGAINST SUICIDE

- ◇ Let us now look at the other side of the argument: the view that we should always intervene to stop a person from committing suicide. Edwin Schneidman was a leading figure in the field of suicidology, professor of thanatology at UCLA, and author of over 20 books on suicide and suicide prevention.
- ◇ Schneidman believed that there is no single, simple explanation for suicide. Whatever the cause, though, Schneidman believed that it can be addressed; nobody has to die by his or her own hand.
- ◇ What about Szasz's charge that trying to prevent a suicide is violating someone's autonomy? Schneidman argued that, in general, people do not have a single, unified desire for suicide. They are conflicted, ambivalent. So it is naive to speak of the desire for suicide as representing a person's unified, autonomous will. Furthermore, people who are suffering from a mental illness cannot always make choices that are in their best interests.
- ◇ Estimates are that over 85 percent of people who commit suicide have mental illnesses such as depression and other mood disorders, substance abuse problems, schizophrenia, and so on. There is increasing evidence that there is at least some biological component to many of these conditions, so Szasz's distinction between a "disease" one suffers (like cancer) and an "act" one chooses (like suicide), is highly questionable.
- ◇ There is also another kind of argument for always preventing suicides—the theological argument. A theistic objection to this would be as follows: Your life has been given to you by God. Only God can decide a person's lifespan, and to take your own life is to arrogate to yourself the prerogative of our creator.
- ◇ To the extent that it addresses suicide, scripture generally seems to oppose it. The Bible has surprisingly little to say about it directly, but many passages can be interpreted as constituting a divine prohibition against suicide, starting with the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill."

- ◇ One might respond to such a prohibition this way: If life is a gift from God, then a person, as the receiver of the gift, can do with it what they want. The objection to this argument is that some gifts are not unrestricted, but are conditional.
- ◇ Philosopher Milton Gonsalves maintains that the theistic objection is the only strong argument against suicide. He writes, “The case against suicide requires proof that God’s gift of life to us is not an outright but a restricted gift, that he has not given us full ownership and control over our person with the right to destroy it at our discretion.”
- ◇ For the writer and existentialist philosopher Albert Camus, the central question facing us as human beings is: Why don’t we just kill ourselves? Camus was an atheist who believed that this life is all that there is.
- ◇ To portray the human condition, Camus chose the figure of Sisyphus, the king condemned by the gods to eternally push a rock up a hill only to have the rock roll back down again so that he must start over. But Camus found value in Sisyphus’s scornful struggle.
- ◇ Is this a fair analogy to our lives? Let’s imagine a twist on the Sisyphus story. Imagine that Sisyphus had many rocks, and every time he rolled one up the hill, it remained at the top. When he got each rock to the top, he could place it in relationship to the previous rock. So Sisyphus could build things. Homes, sculptures, temples. Imagine that people came to live there and enjoy the fruits of Sisyphus’s labors.
- ◇ If we must use a rock pushing metaphor, wouldn’t this revised version more closely resemble our lives? There might not be a final resolution that ties everything together, but we create things that matter to ourselves and others, and we participate in systems of meaning that we ourselves create.
- ◇ The philosopher Thomas Nagel argues we can always step back and attain a “meta-perspective” on our own life. This ability to transcend our particular position and see our lives *sub specie aeternitatis*—that is, from the perspective of eternity—shows us that all of our choices can be called into

question, that our attempts to justify how we live will end up in circularity or arbitrariness.

- ◇ Rather than produce despair, however, Nagel says that this simultaneously “sobering and comical” perspective casts a shadow of irony over the lives we take so seriously. He criticizes Camus’s position as “romantic and slightly self-pitying.”



## PREVENTING SUICIDE

- ◇ In their very different ways, Schneidman, Gonsalves, Camus, and Nagel are all offering reasons to—in the words of Deuteronomy—choose life.
- ◇ A very high percentage of people who attempt suicide are either suffering from a mental illness (which might be exacerbated by drug or alcohol use), or in the midst of a very difficult period in their lives, or both.
- ◇ In a period of high vulnerability, seeing no other way out, they try to end their lives. But mental illness and painful life events can make it difficult for most people to think clearly and make a wise decision.
- ◇ Consider the fact that 9 out of 10 people who attempt suicide and live do *not* go on to commit suicide later. Matthew Miller, associate director of the Harvard Injury Control Research Center, says, “If you save a life in the short run, you likely save a life in the long run.”
- ◇ There is a documentary called *The Choice of a Lifetime* that illustrates this point powerfully. It features a number of people who did not succeed in their suicide attempts. They all talk about how thankful they are that they lived, often expressing their deep gratitude for people who intervened to stop their suicide attempt.

- ◇ One part of the documentary focuses on a young gay woman who became suicidal because of the alienation and rejection she experienced. Studies have shown that gay and transgender youth are four times more likely to attempt suicide than others their age.
- ◇ The Suicide Prevention Resource Center estimates that between 30–40 percent of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth attempt suicide. The young woman in the documentary expressed gratitude to the friends that stopped her from jumping off a bridge, and can now look back with compassion on her younger self, wishing that she could reassure her and convince her that it will, in fact, get better.
- ◇ We must also take into account how devastating suicides are for the victim's family and friends. The symptoms of grief that we discussed previously regarding the death of others are often magnified in cases of suicide.



## WARNING SIGNS

- ◇ One way to help prevent suicides is to learn the warning signs, which can be verbal or behavioral. Verbal signs can include people saying things like, “Life isn’t worth living,” “This will all be over soon,” “They won’t have to deal with me anymore,” “Nobody cares about me, nobody will miss me,” and, of course, any direct threats of suicide.
- ◇ Another sign is when someone begins saying “goodbye” in person or through letters to friends and family. Behavioral signs include reckless activity—acting as if there’s nothing to lose, social disconnection, giving things away, a lack of concern for hygiene, lack of motivation, and not planning for the future. Special attention should be paid to people who have suffered a traumatic event or serious loss, and people who have made previous attempts at suicide.
- ◇ If you notice these warning signs in someone else, you can follow the advice of psychologist Dr. Paul Quinnett. He advocates an approach that can be expressed with three letters, QPR, which stand for:
  - **Question:** If you think someone is at risk, ask him or her. Remain as calm as possible during the conversation. People can react very emotionally, which can make things worse. Listen with concern but without judging or agitation.
  - **Persuade:** As you talk, listen for the reasons the person wants to live—relationships, meaningful pursuits. Try to help them see that things can get better, that there are reasons to live. What can matter more than finding the exact right words is to just be there, to be supportive.
  - **Refer:** Help the person get assistance. Encourage him or her to see a professional or call a hotline.

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**  
**1-800-273-TALK (8255)**

## SOCIETY AND SUICIDE

- ◇ If our society is to deal effectively with suicide, a multi-pronged approach is required. One part of it is to make effective therapy available to those who need it. Both cognitive-behavioral therapy and dialectical behavior therapy have been used successfully to prevent suicide.
- ◇ Long-term psychotherapy might be necessary for some. There must also be effective training for medical professionals, and more general public education focusing on suicide risk factors and prevention.
- ◇ In addition, many people have been helped by anti-depressants and other pharmaceuticals. But it is important that, in the case of anyone who expresses suicidal thoughts, the underlying issues be addressed. These might include substance abuse, mental health issues, and known risk factors such as domestic violence or a general environment of poverty and violence.

## THE MEANS

- ◇ It is also important to think about the *means* by which people commit suicide. In America, this leads to the politically charged issue of guns. Although people disagree sharply on it, it's important to address it briefly.
- ◇ In America, men kill themselves at three to four times the rate of women, but women attempt suicide more often. One possible explanation for the higher death rate in men is the means they use to kill themselves. Men are more likely to use a gun, whereas women are more likely to attempt a drug overdose.
- ◇ According to the Harvard School for Public Health, drug overdoses succeed around 3 percent of the time, whereas suicide attempts with a gun are fatal 85 percent of the time. Over half the suicides in America are the result of firearms; more people kill themselves with guns than all other means combined. In fact, over 60 percent of all gun deaths in the U.S. are suicides.

- ◇ In other parts of the world, different means are employed. It is more common in Asia for people to use poisons, such as pesticides. One relevant factor is that people who use these other methods—for instance, carbon monoxide poisoning or drug overdoses—have time to reconsider and call for help, as opposed to the immediacy of a gunshot.

## SUGGESTED READING

Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*.

Donnelly, *Suicide: Right or Wrong?*

Jamison, *Night Falls Fast: Understanding Suicide*.

Quinnett, *Suicide: The Forever Decision*.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 Can suicide ever be rational? Is the desire to commit suicide itself a sign of mental illness?
- 2 Should one always intervene to try to stop a suicide?
- 3 What are the warning signs to recognize? What are the best ways to help a person who is suicidal?
- 4 In what ways is the myth of Sisyphus analogous to human existence, and in what ways is it not?



# THE CHOICE OF EUTHANASIA

Many people have strong opinions on the subject of euthanasia—the deliberate ending of someone’s life in order to end his or her suffering. This lecture describes different types of euthanasia, then focuses in on debates about one of them in particular: voluntary euthanasia. Given how sharply opinions can differ on euthanasia, it’s not surprising that laws, religious views, and policy arguments on the subject vary greatly.

## TYPES OF EUTHANASIA

- ◇ Ethicists often divide euthanasia into three kinds: voluntary, non-voluntary, and involuntary.
  - Voluntary euthanasia is when a person is killed with their consent; death must be clearly requested.
  - Non-voluntary euthanasia is when the patient is unable to give consent—for example, when someone is in a persistent vegetative state and has left no instructions regarding the use of life support.
  - Involuntary euthanasia means that the death is carried out against the person’s will. Many would call this murder, but there have been cases of people killing others who had no wish to die, in order to prevent them from suffering pain that they didn’t realize they would soon face.
- ◇ Rather than dwell on such relatively rare and marginal examples, though, we’re going to focus primarily on the category in which the most important debates over euthanasia are taking place today: voluntary euthanasia.

- ◇ Within voluntary euthanasia, an important distinction is made between passive euthanasia and active euthanasia. *Passive euthanasia* refers to cases where the means of keeping someone alive are withdrawn at the person's request, resulting in his or her death from the underlying ailment. *Active euthanasia* involves someone, normally a physician, intentionally causing the patient's death by administering a lethal dose of something—be it a pill, a gas, or an injection—with the patient's consent.
- ◇ If the patient administers the fatal dose him or herself, but does so with the guidance of a doctor, the act is called *physician-assisted suicide*.

## EUTHANASIA LAWS

- ◇ Most countries ban any form of active euthanasia, but many Western European countries allow it—including the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Switzerland, and Germany. In the United States, passive euthanasia is legal, but as of the date of this writing, only five states allow some form of active euthanasia. Those states are Oregon, Washington, Montana, New Mexico, and Vermont.
- ◇ Oregon was the first state to permit physician-assisted suicide, by means of a 1994 ballot initiative called the Death with Dignity Act. It contains several measures to prevent abuse, including the involvement of multiple physicians, formal requests, witness requirements, and a waiting period.

## A CASE

- ◇ To get a better sense of the nature of the controversy over euthanasia, let's consider an actual case that illustrates the importance of the distinction between passive and active euthanasia. A woman, Martha, suffered a massive stroke that left her in a persistent vegetative state. She did not have a respirator, but required a nasogastric feeding tube. The physicians believed that she could continue to live for another 20 years in this condition.

- ◇ Her husband wanted the tube removed so that she could be allowed to die, in accordance with the wishes she had previously expressed. The tube was removed, but this meant that Martha would die a slow death by starvation.
- ◇ Martha's husband asked the physician whether he could do something to hasten the process. The physician refused, because that would mean moving from passive to active euthanasia, which was not within his professional responsibilities.
- ◇ The doctor's position matched that of the American Medical Association (AMA), which stated in 1973: "The intentional termination of the life of one human being by another—mercy killing—is contrary to that for which the medical profession stands."

## PHILOSOPHICAL ARGUMENTS

- ◇ Philosopher James Rachels calls into question positions such as that of the AMA on active and passive euthanasia. For one thing, he argues, active euthanasia is more humane than passive euthanasia, which often prolongs death and unnecessary suffering. Second, he argues that there is no significant moral distinction between "letting die" and "killing."
- ◇ Philosopher Bonnie Steinbock disagrees with Rachels on this point, arguing that the cessation of life-prolonging treatment is different from intentionally letting someone die. She states that the right to refuse treatment must be honored, not because people have the right to choose death, but because they have the right to be free from "the unwanted interferences of others."
- ◇ Another reason to give people the right to refuse treatment is that the treatment might bring "greater discomfort than relief," and might have little chance of helping.

## REQUIREMENTS

- ◇ A significant factor in decisions over the use of euthanasia is whether or not the patient's death is believed to be imminent. In most cases where active euthanasia is permitted, imminent death is required.
- ◇ Imagine two people, both of whom are in great pain. One is going to die within a week; the other won't die for another couple of years, or within any predictable time span.
- ◇ Oregon grants the right of choosing death to the person facing imminent death, but not the person who will continue to suffer for many months. Isn't it the case that the second person actually needs the right to a quick, painless death even more than the first person? Why is imminent death a necessary condition?
- ◇ Let us consider a case of someone who did not have a terminal illness. Donald Cowart nearly died when he was severely burned in an explosion at the age of 26. He suffered deep burns over most of his body. Cowart lost his hands, eyes, ears, and most of his skin, and he could barely move his arms and legs. He also suffered excruciating pain, intensified by some of the treatments he was forced to endure.
- ◇ No longer able to see, walk, do any of the activities he loved to do before the accident, or take care of any of his basic needs, he decided that he wanted to die. He expressed his wish frequently, over a long period of time, in what those around him called a "lucid and articulate" way.
- ◇ Cowart made a powerful case for his right to end his own life. And he attempted to commit suicide a number of times, with drug overdoses and by using his one remaining digit to slash his wrists. None of his attempts were successful.

- ◇ So, should someone have honored Donald Cowart's request and put him out of his misery? Before answering that question, there is an additional part of the story to consider. Throughout years of suffering, Donald Cowart did not die. He changed his name to Dax, married, divorced, remarried, completed law school, and is now a passionate advocate for patient's rights.
- ◇ What lesson are we to take from this? On the one hand, thanks to the treatment he received, he is alive and able to do important and fulfilling work. At the same time, he still adamantly believes that people should have the right to decide whether or not to accept treatment regardless of whether a condition is terminal, and that people should have the right to die.
- ◇ Cowart's argument for his right to die is compelling. The need to respect the autonomy of the person who is suffering, combined with our inability to imagine what it is like to be in such agonizing, unrelenting pain, makes it difficult to tell someone in that position that he is not allowed to end his life. And yet, the fact that he's glad to be alive and doing so much good gives one pause.

## RELIGION AND EUTHANASIA

- ◇ It is generally permissible within the monotheistic religions to refuse treatment or technology that would keep one alive. In other words, passive euthanasia is accepted. However, in most forms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, active euthanasia is forbidden.
- ◇ And yet there are Jews, Christians, and Muslims who support active euthanasia. A key question underlying the debate is: Who has control over a person's death, the individual or God?
- ◇ The division can be seen clearly among different Christian denominations. The Roman Catholic view opposes any direct, active ending of life. It is generally consistent in requiring the preservation of life under all circumstances, including abortion, the death penalty, and euthanasia.

- ◇ The United Church of Christ (UCC) takes the opposite view of active euthanasia. Its official statement on the issue declares: “While we may and do learn from suffering, we do not believe it to be the intentional will of God that persons must be so tested.”

## POLICY ARGUMENTS

- ◇ There are also non-religious, policy-based arguments for and against euthanasia that help explain the current inconsistency in how it is treated under the law. Opponents of euthanasia argue that legalizing it would lead to a significant change in the way we think of the doctor-patient relationship. Doctors, the argument goes, are here to help us, to heal us, not to cause our deaths. They must be on the side of life.
- ◇ Supporters of the right to euthanasia counter that if a doctor’s job is to alleviate suffering, then there will be cases in which the only way to do this is to help a patient end his or her life.
- ◇ Another risk is that opening up the possibility of choosing death might lead to a number of abuses. Treatment can be extraordinarily expensive, and a patient might not want to feel like a burden to his or her family. Those with baser motives might be influenced by the thoughts of what’s in the will.
- ◇ In spite of such concerns, some organizations and individuals have dedicated themselves to making euthanasia legal and available. The Hemlock Society, an organization dedicated to assisting the dying in having a peaceful death and supporting laws to make that possible, was founded in 1980. In 2003, the Hemlock Society merged with another organization now called Compassion and Choices.
- ◇ Some members of these right-to-die organizations started the Final Exit Network in 2004. One way that Final Exit’s position differs from that of many other euthanasia advocates is that the organization does not require that an individual face imminent death.

- ◇ Unsuccessful attempts were made to prosecute Final Exit in Arizona and Georgia, but in 2015, a conviction was obtained against Final Exit in Minnesota for assisting a woman's suicide.
- ◇ The most famous right-to-die advocate was pathologist Jack Kevorkian, who promoted physician-assisted suicide. He was known for the statement, "Dying is not a crime." He claimed to have assisted in the deaths of 130 people using machines that the patient controlled with a button, which would release lethal drugs or a gas. For Kevorkian, the key factor was suffering, not how long a person had left to live.
- ◇ In 1998, he went a step beyond assisting patients with his machines: He gave an injection of potassium chloride to a patient dying from ALS who had given his fully informed consent. What's more, Kevorkian taped the act, and then gave the tape to the news show *60 Minutes*. He essentially dared the authorities to prosecute him, which they did.
- ◇ He was convicted and went to prison for second-degree murder in 1999. He was eventually released for good behavior in 2007, after promising not to promote or assist in suicides. He died in 2011 at the age of 83. But his example continues to inspire the right-to-die movement.

## SUGGESTED READING

Hamel, *Choosing Death*.

Lavi, *The Modern Art of Dying*.

Rachels, *The End of Life*.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 What are the theological and non-theological arguments against euthanasia?
- 2 What are the most compelling arguments in favor of euthanasia?
- 3 What are the possible abuses that can occur if euthanasia is legal, and how can legislation be written to prevent these abuses?
- 4 Should a person have to be near death to be legally allowed to choose death?
- 5 What are the differences between voluntary and non-voluntary, passive and active euthanasia?
- 6 Which, if any, should be legally permitted?



# KILLING IN WAR AND THE PACIFIST CHALLENGE

Most of us would agree that one of the worst things a human being can do is to intentionally take another person's life—at least, if the person has no wish to die and the killing would not spare him or her from suffering, as with the case of euthanasia. Religiously, the unjustified killing a person is considered one of the gravest sins, and legally it is considered one of the most heinous crimes. Given the enormity of the act of killing, it is essential that we consider the nature of war and determine when, if ever, we are justified in waging it.

## HUMAN INSTINCTS

- ◇ Part of the training of soldiers involves preparing them to override their moral instincts and tap into the forces within themselves that will enable them to kill human beings. Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman, a former West Point psychology professor and Army Ranger, spent much of his career, in his words, “learning and studying how to enable people to kill.”
- ◇ James Garbarino, a professor at Loyola University Chicago, points to a study of WWII combat that concluded most American infantry (80 percent) were not able to actually shoot at the enemy because of “the fundamental human inhibition against violence toward other human beings.”
- ◇ While there is some disagreement about the percentage that pulled the trigger, it was clear that many soldiers were unable to do it when they had another human being in their sights.

- ◇ Because of this, Grossman says, the U.S. military changed its approach to training to incorporate more desensitization, including shooting at human-like targets rather than bull's eyes.

## WHAT DRIVES WAR?

- ◇ Wars are almost always occurring somewhere in the world, and this has been the case throughout recorded history. Must we conclude that human beings are somehow predisposed toward violence?
- ◇ Beginning with the book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud speculated that humans' drive toward life existed simultaneously with a death drive, what he called *thanatos*. In contrast to the drive to continue to exist, it was a drive to return to an inorganic state, to cease to exist.
- ◇ As he continued to think about this aspect of human beings later in his career, he focused more on the drive toward destruction that is directed outward. He wrote, "A portion of the death instinct is diverted towards the external world and comes to light as an instinct of aggressiveness."
- ◇ Ernest Becker looked at human aggression differently. Becker argued that our transcendence of death is threatened when our meaning systems are undermined or attacked, so we seek to destroy whatever attacks them.
- ◇ In his book *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*, journalist Chris Hedges offers yet another reason why war has been a constant in human history: The battlefield is the ultimate test of courage, the crucible in which character is made and tested and in which deep, lasting brotherhoods are forged.
- ◇ Many soldiers find it difficult to return to their peacetime lives, which lack the intensity, high stakes and perceived nobility of war. At the same time, the actions undertaken in war can seem increasingly irrational and disturbing to veterans as they look back, and many struggle with their consciences.



## JUST WAR

- ◇ *Just war doctrines* involve establishing criteria to apply in order to determine if a war is morally justified. In the classic Western just war tradition, a distinction is made between *jus ad bellum*, a Latin phrase meaning “the justice of going to war,” and *jus in bello*, which means “justice in how the war is fought.”
- ◇ Six criteria have emerged as commonly shared between “just war” theories.
  - The first is that there must be a just cause. A just society has the right to self-defense and therefore is justified in taking up arms against an aggressor. By extension, it can also be just for other nations to intervene on behalf of a nation or people who are the victims of aggression.
  - Second, the war must be declared by a proper authority. This authority must announce its intentions and has the responsibility to give the target a last chance to cease aggression.

- Third, there must be a right intention. The motives for going to war must be moral, not merely self-serving.
  - Fourth, war must be a last resort, undertaken only when all peaceful alternatives have been exhausted.
  - Fifth, there must be a reasonable probability of success. It is not permissible to send people to kill and die in an action that is known in advance to be futile.
  - The sixth criterion is proportionality. The good that will come out of the war must be proportionate to, or outweigh, the expected harm that will be done.
- ◇ Once war has begun, it must be waged in a just fashion. This is where the notion of *jus in bello*, the justice in how the war is fought, is applied.
- The first principle is “discrimination” between combatants and civilians.
  - Second, there is a principle of proportionality (different from that in the *jus ad bellum* category). When planning an attack on a legitimate military target, the potential harm to civilians or their property must not be excessive in relation to the military benefits that will be gained by the attack.
  - Other elements of *jus in bello* include the proper treatment of prisoners of war and the prohibition of the use of weapons whose damage cannot be controlled and restricted to combatants.
- ◇ Many of these principles are contained in the Geneva Conventions, which were first established in 1864 and then updated a number of times, most recently in 1949. They address the rights and protections that must be given to prisoners of war and for civilians.
- ◇ Principles related to the permissible conduct and use of various weapons of war are addressed in the Hague Convention and the Geneva Protocol, which prohibits the use of biological and chemical weapons.

- ◇ There is a distressing gap between all these principles and the reality of war in our time. At best, the effort to limit war to just causes and methods has itself been an ongoing battle.

## PACIFISM

- ◇ In lieu of establishing rules to restrict warfare, pacifists advocate avoiding it. Professor Duane Cady, author of *From Warism to Pacifism: A Moral Continuum*, describes pacifism as “the view that war, by its very nature, is morally wrong and that humans should work for peaceful resolution of conflict.” Because war typically requires mass participation, however, this position has sometimes brought pacifists into conflict with the majority of people in their society.
- ◇ Only a small minority of people would identify as “pacifists.” But a number of Christian denominations, including Quakers, Mennonites, and Seventh Day Adventists, have espoused pacifist principles and advocated conscientious objection. There are passages within the Bible beyond the prohibition against murder in the Ten Commandments that support pacifist principles.
- ◇ Many see Jesus’s ministry as including an emphasis on pacifism, and many of his most memorable sayings, such as “Love your enemies” and “Blessed are the peacemakers,” support this view.
- ◇ Nonviolent forms of opposition can be active, confrontational, and require great courage. Gandhi’s advocacy of nonviolent resistance to British rule in India and Martin Luther King’s use of nonviolent protests during the civil rights movement in the United States, for example, were very active forms of protest.
- ◇ Pacifism takes a variety of forms, which together can be viewed, in Cady’s words, as a “pacifist continuum.” To begin with, a person can be opposed to *violence*, but not necessarily be opposed to the use of *force*. There are forms of physical force that strive to be non-harming.

- ◇ Take, for example, the so-called soft martial arts, like judo and aikido, whereby the attacker is controlled and subdued without necessarily doing any harm to him. War always involves not just force but violence, so one can learn to defend oneself with force and still be opposed to all violence, and therefore war.
- ◇ The next step along the continuum is what is known as *collectivist pacifism*, whereby a person might believe that even lethal violence is sometimes justified (for example, in self-defense or capital punishment), but believes that the uncontrollable *mass* violence unleashed in warfare makes *war* unjustifiable.
- ◇ There is also *technological pacifism*, which holds that the destructiveness of modern weaponry and the fact that it kills so many civilians have made war unjustifiable.

## DOES PACIFISM WORK?

- ◇ A common criticism of pacifism is that it simply doesn't work. Pacifism, the argument goes, isn't practical because it would only work if everybody shared a commitment to peace. Too many people do not, so we must be ready to fight.
- ◇ While one can make a compelling argument that taking up arms is the only way to deal with threats like that posed by the Nazis in WWII, or by the brutal Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL) today, it is also undeniable that organized movements committed to nonviolent resistance have been remarkably successful throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.
- ◇ In addition to the successful movements of Gandhi and King, there are numerous other examples: the toppling of the authoritarian, and often oppressive, governments of Suharto in Indonesia, Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, and, most recently, Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt.



- ◇ Add to these the successful movements for democracy in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Soviet Union, involving such leaders as Lech Walesa and Vaclav Havel, and the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa under the inspirational leadership of Nelson Mandela.
- ◇ In his book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, psychology professor Steven Pinker argues that, as a species, we have become less violent over time. Pinker writes that we possess four “better angels” of our natures, which orient us “away from violence and towards cooperation and altruism.” For Pinker, these are empathy, self-control, reason, and a moral sense (i.e., cultural norms, rules, and taboos; here is where we see elements of Freud’s superego).

- ◇ Whether or not human beings move toward violence and domination or compassion and peace has much to do with how we cultivate the better angels and tame—through practices and institutions—the inner demons that angle us toward violence.
- ◇ Pinker locates five historical forces that explain why a movement away from the demons and toward the angels and peace has occurred. These five are:
  - 1 The rise of the nation-state with a monopoly on force, constrained by the rule of law
  - 2 The rise of technologically driven trade and commerce that puts us in regular contact with each other and establishes our interdependence
  - 3 The increased political and social influence of women
  - 4 Cosmopolitanism, involving mass media and literacy, which enables people to widen their circle of sympathy and concern beyond their small in-group
  - 5 What Pinker calls the “escalator of reason,” which will lead people to a greater recognition of the harm and futility of ongoing aggression and violence and find ways to seek peace.
- ◇ War should never be a mere abstraction to us, something that occurs on a map or is discussed solely in geopolitical terms. The human cost must be foremost in our minds. When we think also in terms of broken and dead bodies, we make decisions about war with fully open eyes.

## SUGGESTED READING

Cady, *From Warism and Pacifism*.

Hedges, *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*.



Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*.

Walzer, *Just and Unjust War*.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 Do people have a “death instinct?”
- 2 Is war inevitable given human nature?
- 3 What are the criteria to determine if a war is just?
- 4 Would you locate yourself anywhere on the pacifist continuum?

# CONSIDERING CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

While there is widespread agreement among the nations of the world that they have the right to kill in the context of war, at least under certain conditions, the same is not true when it comes to killing their own citizens. In this lecture, we're going to explore the nature of capital punishment, the arguments for and against it, and whether or not it accomplishes its intended purposes. We'll focus primarily on capital punishment in the United States, where debate on the issue has long been intense.

## HISTORY OF THE DEATH PENALTY

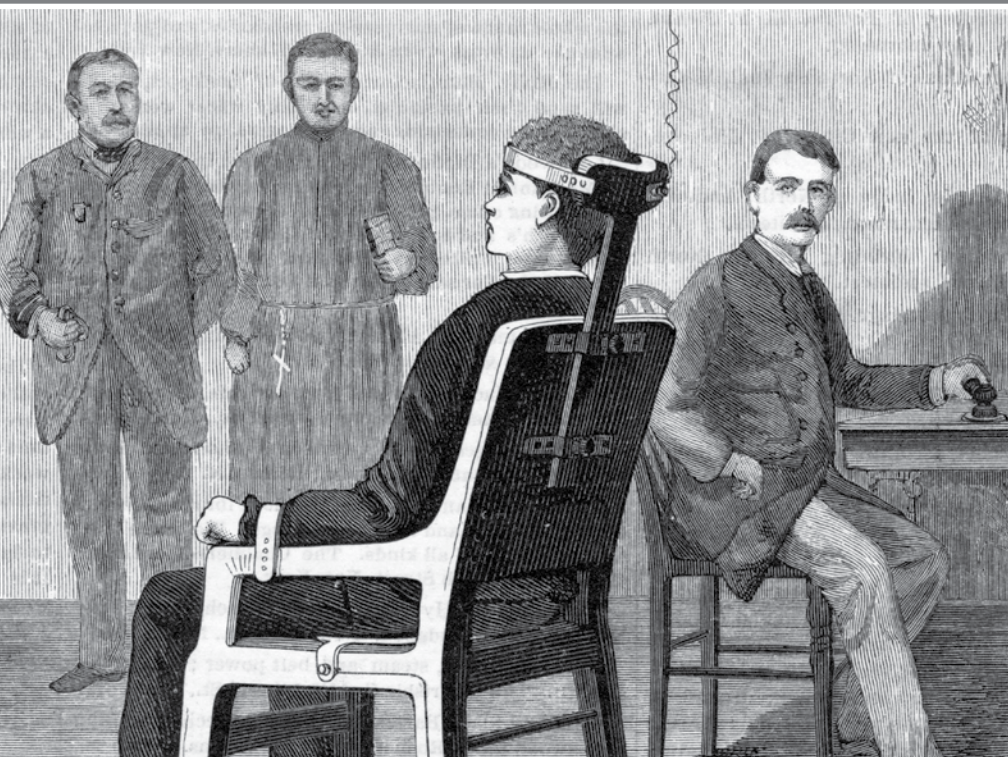
- ◇ In order to understand America's complex relationship with the death penalty, we must look at its history. In England prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many crimes were considered capital offenses, including robbery, burglary, and counterfeiting—as well as murder and treason, which are still punishable by death in the United States today.
- ◇ In the pre-revolutionary American colonies, a number of religious and moral offenses were punishable by death, including blasphemy, idolatry, adultery, sodomy, and witchcraft. Only in 2008 did the U.S. Supreme Court rule that “As it relates to crimes against individuals ... the death penalty should not be expanded to instances where the victim's life was not taken.”
- ◇ Nevertheless, a number of states still have such laws on the books. Crimes other than murder that are punishable by death either at the federal level or in some states include rape of a child, treason, espionage, aircraft hijacking, and drug trafficking.

- ◇ Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, capital crimes specifically targeted black people, especially in the Southern colonies, where black people encouraging slaves to run away, or hitting a white person hard enough to leave a bruise, were crimes punishable by death. Execution rates were far higher for blacks than for whites, and many scholars argue that the death penalty continues to be applied in a racist way today.



## METHODS OF EXECUTION

- ◇ In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, many methods were used for executing people—some remarkably brutal, such as being disemboweled and quartered. The most painful form of execution, burning someone alive, was reserved for slaves who killed their owners or women who killed their husbands.
- ◇ The most popular method of execution from the colonial period all the way until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was hanging, which is still permitted in two states. Hanging often failed to break the neck of the condemned person, however, resulting in a more agonizing death by suffocation.
- ◇ During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Americans began to demand that executions be carried out in the most humane way possible, and hanging was replaced by the electric chair. Thomas Edison tested this new method on animals in his lab. Nevertheless, it, too, turned out to cause suffering.



- ◇ For example, 17-year-old Willie Francis was electrocuted in 1946, but did not die, and instead was left screaming in pain; he appealed to the Supreme Court but lost and died after a second electrocution. In two other cases, inmates' heads caught on fire.
- ◇ In the 1920s, states also began to use the gas chamber. There were problems with this method as well, resulting in people dying slowly and painfully.
- ◇ In 1982, states began to use lethal injection using a three-drug combination involving a sedative, a paralytic and, finally, potassium chloride to stop the heart. Once again, complications sometimes resulted; in 2014, convicted murderer Clayton Lockett was given a cocktail of drugs designed to kill him painlessly, but he writhed for some 43 minutes before he died.
- ◇ Another problem is that states have found it increasingly difficult to get the drugs they need for executions, as European suppliers refuse to sell to the United States if the drugs are going to be used for that purpose.

## DEATH PENALTY OPPOSITION

- ◇ Opposition to the death penalty has existed in the United States from the nation's earliest days. The founders of the United States themselves were conflicted about it.
- ◇ At first, opposition in the new nation was largely directed at the application of the death penalty to property crimes, but by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, some people began to question the morality of the death penalty itself, even for murder.
- ◇ The slowly rising tide of opposition eventually culminated in the case of *Furman v. Georgia* (1972). A slim majority of U.S. Supreme Court justices found the death penalty to be "unconstitutional," although they differed on the reasons for their decision. The justices in the majority all agreed that the imposition of the death penalty constitutes "cruel and unusual punishment" in violation of the Eighth Amendment, but they differed over what, precisely, made it so.

- ◇ In the 1976 case of *Gregg v. Georgia*, the Supreme Court concluded that a death sentence is *not* “cruel and unusual,” and is not disproportionate for the crime of murder. It said, “It is an extreme sanction, suitable to the most extreme of crimes.”
- ◇ The ruling in the Gregg case came via a 7–2 majority, with only Justices Marshall and Brennan dissenting. Yet several justices who voted with the majority came to regret their decision.

## THE DEBATE

- ◇ Let’s examine some of the moral arguments for and against capital punishment in greater detail. Robert Bidinotto, writing for the Law Enforcement Alliance of America Advocate, argued, “The moral defense of the death penalty is the principle of justice. In the case of premeditated murder, capital punishment is the only just punishment: it is the only punishment roughly proportionate to the harm that has been done to the murder victim.”
- ◇ Death penalty proponents argue that killing those who take innocent life actually demonstrates our belief in life’s sanctity. This idea dates to ancient times. In Genesis 9:6, God tells Noah, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.”
- ◇ Connected with notions of retribution and justice is the idea of “closure” for the victims. But death penalty opponents reject the idea that retribution should motivate our punishment of criminals.
- ◇ Opponents urge us to consider mitigating factors in the life histories of convicted criminals that may have prompted them to kill. David Dow, a lawyer specializing in death penalty cases, says that nearly 80 percent of death row inmates come from dysfunctional families, have experiences of abuse and neglect, and have “exposure to the juvenile justice system.”

- ◇ Responding to the idea that scripture commands capital punishment for murder, death penalty opponents point to other passages that oppose it—including Jesus’s intervention to prevent the execution of an adulterous woman by stoning, and his famous words, “Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.”
- ◇ Some death penalty opponents also worry about the coarsening effect that capital punishment can have on people. Peter L. Berger of Boston University argues that capital punishment “morally corrupts those who enforce and inflict it.” In effect, he says that killing is no way to show people that killing is wrong.
- ◇ Another argument made by death penalty proponents is based on deterrence—the idea that nothing would deter a potential criminal more than the threat of the ultimate penalty, death. Death penalty opponents point out that numerous studies have determined that the death penalty is *not* a deterrent to murder. It can be difficult to determine how many crimes would have been committed but for the threat of death. Justice Thurgood Marshall explained, “No one can ever know how many people have refrained from murder because of the fear of being hanged.”
- ◇ But if there is a deterrent effect to the death penalty, it seems clear that murders should be less frequent where the death penalty is in effect, and more frequent where it isn’t. A quick survey of statistics suggests that neither is the case. In the United States, the South is by far the region where most executions take place (over 80 percent of all American executions are in the South, with over one-third in Texas alone since 1976). And yet the FBI reports that the South has the highest murder rate. The lowest murder rate is found in the northeast, which has the fewest executions annually.

## CRUEL AND UNUSUAL?

- ◇ As we have already seen, an important argument advanced by those who oppose the death penalty is that it violates the Eighth Amendment’s prohibition against “cruel and unusual punishment.”

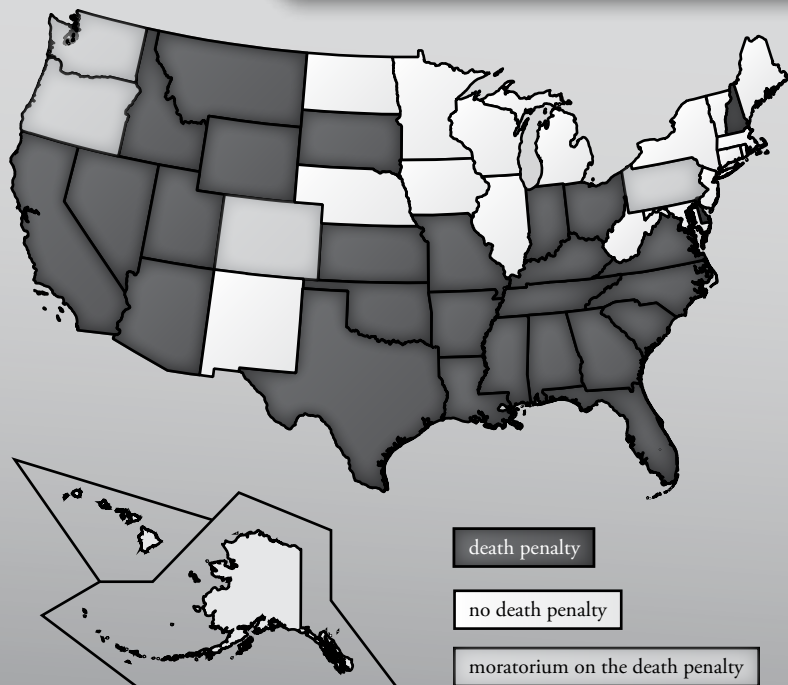
- ◇ Advocates of the death penalty have countered that there is a long tradition of capital punishment in the West. Executing people is, therefore, certainly not “unusual” in most parts of the world throughout most periods of history.
- ◇ Some death penalty opponents support their position that capital punishment is “unusual” by pointing to the way world opinion has shifted against capital punishment.
- ◇ Some death penalty critics argue that another element of its cruelty is arbitrariness. One of the biggest factors determining whether or not a person convicted of murder gets the death penalty is simply where the crime is committed: All 39 executions in America in 2013 came from about 1 percent of the nation’s counties. Over half occurred in Texas and Florida.
- ◇ Wealth also has an impact on who receives the death sentence and who doesn’t, in part because wealthier defendants can often hire more experienced lawyers with greater resources at their disposal.
- ◇ The death sentence can also be considered cruel in the psychological suffering of inmates who wait for years or decades on death row. Peter L. Berger argues, “It is an act of unutterable cruelty to hold an individual in prison and to inform him that he will be put to death on a specified date.”
- ◇ Still another objection to the death penalty is that there is substantial evidence that it is applied in a racist manner—making it both arbitrary and a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment’s injunction against any state denying people within its jurisdiction “the equal protection of the laws.”

## ERRORS

- ◇ To many death penalty opponents, the most compelling argument against capital punishment is that inevitably, errors will be made in death penalty sentencing, resulting in innocent people being put to death by the state.



## States with and without the death penalty as of July 1, 2015



Source: <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/states-and-without-death-penalty>

- ◇ Over 150 people have been released from death row with evidence of their innocence since 1973. People have been wrongfully convicted and sentenced to death in most of the states that have the death penalty.
- ◇ A recent study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* that looked at over 7,000 death row convictions over a 30-year period concluded that at least 4 percent of death row inmates are innocent.

- ◇ How do supporters of the death penalty respond to the problem of errors leading to an innocent person's death? Ernest van den Haag writes, "The salient question about the death penalty is not: Could innocents be executed by mistake? (The answer is yes—courts are fallible) but: Does the death penalty save more innocent lives than it takes?"
- ◇ To provide an example, van den Haag looks at "desirable social practices that cannot avoid killing innocents by accident." He uses the example of ambulances, which "save many lives but also run over some pedestrians." He concludes, "We do not abolish ambulances, because they save more innocents than they kill."
- ◇ As we have discussed, however, the available evidence does not support the claim that innocent people's lives are saved by the death penalty. Also, it might be argued that there are no good alternatives to ambulances, and every effort is made to avoid accidents. But we do not *have* to execute people; there are alternatives, such as imprisonment.
- ◇ In recent years, the number of executions in the United States has been declining. 1999 saw 98 people executed, the most in any one year—but in 2014, 35 people were executed, the lowest number in over two decades.

## SUGGESTED READING

Banner, *The Death Penalty*.

Pojman and Reimer, *The Death Penalty*.

Williams, ed., *Capital Punishment*.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 Why is the United States alone among Western democracies in carrying out executions?
- 2 If it can be proven that the death penalty is not a deterrent, would it still be justified? If so, why?
- 3 Does the near certainty that innocent people will be executed if the state carries out executions constitute a compelling argument for banning it?
- 4 What are the arguments for and against considering the death penalty cruel and unusual punishment?

# KILLING NON-HUMAN ANIMALS

America is filled with animal lovers: Over 60 percent of American households have at least one cat or dog, and Americans spend over \$50 billion annually on their beloved pets. And yet, America is also filled with animal eaters: Over 95 percent of Americans eat meat. In grappling with the reality of death, we have discussed the idea that life is sacred. Do we really believe that, or only that *human* life is sacred? This lecture looks at how we think about the death of non-human animals, and why.

## MEAT EATERS' RATIONALES

- ◇ One rationale that might be offered for killing animals is that it's a matter of survival. Most of the animals we eat don't generally pose a threat to us, so we don't need to kill them to protect ourselves. But we *do* need nutrition of some kind, and eating animals is a way to get it.
- ◇ This rationale works well with any group of people who rely on subsistence hunting—especially those in regions such as the far north, where living off plant life is difficult or impossible.
- ◇ What about the rest of us? In a recent study, the reason that most people gave for eating meat is that it is “necessary.” The study's author, Jared Piazza of the University of Lancaster, writes, “One popular belief related to the necessity of eating meat is the idea that one cannot maintain a diet that contains enough protein without consuming at least some meat.”
- ◇ But the existence of hundreds of millions of vegetarians in the world testifies to the fact that most people can get everything they need from a vegetarian diet. So, for many people, it is not necessary to kill animals for food.

- ◇ Another explanation for people's seemingly contradictory behavior with respect to other animals is that they just don't think about it much. People in industrialized countries are aided in this mode of thought by the fact that most don't actually kill the animals that they eat.
- ◇ Of course, we aren't the only animals that kill other animals to feed ourselves, and it might be argued that if other species do it, there's no reason why we shouldn't. But there are two major differences between these two cases: First, carnivores like lions and tigers have no choice. We do, and where there's choice, moral reflection is unavoidable. Second, the way most animals are killed for food in industrialized nations is far removed from anything that can be labeled "natural."
- ◇ Many people will simply say, "animals taste good." But, philosophers like Peter Singer and James Rachels would ask: Can we really justify killing by appealing to our pleasure, to a purely aesthetic consideration?



## RELIGION AND NON-HUMAN ANIMALS

- ◇ Many of the religions that originated in India, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, place a strong emphasis on animal ethics. Why is there a greater focus on animal welfare in the South Asian religious traditions than in, for example, the Abrahamic traditions? Some possible reasons:
  - The doctrine of rebirth: If humans can become other kinds of animals and other animals can become human in future lives, then we must give other animals the same respect we give ourselves.
  - The high value placed on compassion: Spiritually developed beings learn to feel the suffering of all other beings, including other animals.
  - Karma: Killing has very negative karmic consequences.
  - South Asian religions also put a strong emphasis on the value of *ahimsa*, non-harming or non-violence.
  - Even gods take non-human animal form in some of these traditions.

Kamadhenu, a  
revered Hindu goddess  
with bovine features



- ◇ Chinese Buddhists have a practice going back centuries known as the “releasing of life,” or *fang sheng*, in which they purchase animals destined for slaughter and release them. The 11<sup>th</sup>-century Song dynasty emperor Zhenzong ordered that ponds be restored so that aquatic animals could be released there.
- ◇ Regarding the Abrahamic traditions: There is a great deal of scriptural evidence that animals, far from being mere objects for human use, are to be seen as beings who can enter into a spiritual communion with God. But among the many diverse forms of Christianity, there is not a universally shared view or attitude. Some forms feature a hierarchy, with humans as the only species created in the image of God—a category qualitatively different from “the beasts.”
- ◇ On the other end of the spectrum, we have, throughout the history of Christianity, monks, saints, mystics, and theologians who felt a deep connection with non-human animals. The best known of these is, of course, St. Francis of Assisi, who wrote, “All praise to you, O Lord, for all of these brother and sister creatures.”

## ANIMAL INTELLIGENCE

- ◇ Based on the work done by ethologists and other experts in animal behaviors and minds, there is no doubt that many animals, particularly mammals, are, as James Rachels writes, “intelligent and sociable creatures who love their children, who experience fear and delight, who sulk, play, and mourn their dead.” As we have discussed previously, grief and mourning behavior has been seen in a wide range of species, including gorillas, lemurs, whales, dolphins, birds, and elephants.
- ◇ In light of this recognition, many modern thinkers urge us to consider animals not as a lesser order of creatures, but as sentient beings whose capacity to feel deserves as much consideration as our own.





- ◇ Unfortunately, though, suffering is a reality throughout much of the industry that turns animals into food for our consumption. In most of the concentrated animal feeding operations, also known as *factory farms*, which produce between 95–99 percent of the meat in America, animals live lives that can only be described as hellish. They are crammed into buildings, many never see sunlight or walk outside, and they don't get to engage in their natural behaviors.

## MORAL PHILOSOPHY

- ◇ Two systems of moral philosophy that have been applied to the issue of animal welfare, and that lead to differing conclusions in certain ways, are utilitarianism and rights-based ethics.
- ◇ In the case of utilitarian ethics, as espoused by the ethicist Peter Singer, an act is good if it produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people (or the least amount of suffering).



- ◇ From the rights-based perspective, as espoused by the philosopher Tom Regan, non-human animals possess certain rights by virtue of the fact that they are subjects of their own life who have interests, not merely objects for our own use.
- ◇ The implications of the utilitarian vs. rights-based ethics diverge. Let's imagine that an animal is raised on a small farm where it can engage in its natural behavior, is cared for well by people in the old tradition of animal husbandry, and then, after living at least most of its natural life, it is killed quickly and painlessly.
- ◇ Would this kind of killing be morally justifiable? From a strictly utilitarian perspective, one can argue that they might be. The animal does not suffer, and there are benefits to human beings. But if you believe in animal rights, including the right to life, then such killing is wrong.

## THE DIFFERENCE JUSTIFICATION

- ◇ Some who attempt to justify our treatment of animals emphasize the differences between humans and non-human animals. Throughout history, people have tried to complete the following statement: "Human beings are the only beings who have \_\_\_\_\_." Various abilities or qualities have been proposed to fill in that blank: tool use, ethics, self-awareness.
- ◇ Yet over time, researchers have found animals that possess each of them. Apes, elephants, dolphins, whales, and other animals have far richer inner lives and far more remarkable abilities than we could have imagined.
- ◇ It is worth considering why humanity has tried for so long to avoid being characterized as one animal among many. If we concede that we are animals, we will have to acknowledge that we die like animals. If we are just animals, then we face the problem of meaning, given our brief lives.
- ◇ This also might be a reason that the concept of evolution through natural selection is unsettling to some people: Animals are not merely resources; they're our relatives.

## A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

- ◇ One can accept the many connections between human beings and other animals and still argue that human beings have a more complex mental life and more sophisticated language than other animals. Now the key question becomes: What is the relevance of these differences?
- ◇ Let's undertake a thought experiment. Imagine that anthropologists trekking through a remote jungle come across a small surviving group of Neanderthals (who became extinct around 40,000 years ago). They are quite similar to *Homo sapiens* (in fact, evidence shows that they interbred with homo sapiens around 50,000 years ago).
- ◇ They share our genus, but not our species. Would we be justified in enslaving them and putting them to work for us? Could we kill them and eat them with impunity?
- ◇ If the thought of this gives you pause, let's ask the same question about *Australopithecus afarensis*, a hominid that lived around 3 million years ago (Lucy, the famous partial skeleton found in Ethiopia, came from this species).
- ◇ As we continue to move back in time, we will come to the place—around 7–8 million years ago—where humans and chimpanzees diverged. Is there a place along the evolutionary continuum where we can suddenly justify killing? If so, where is that place? On what criteria do we justify our decision?

## MINDFUL MEAT EATING

- ◇ As they are in the majority, meat eaters often press those who abstain from eating animals to explain themselves. But philosopher Roger Scruton, a meat eater who writes a defense of eating animals in his article “The Conscientious Carnivore,” argues that “the onus lies on the carnivore to show that there is a way of incorporating meat into a life that respects the moral and spiritual realities, and which does not shame the human race.”



- ◇ Scruton writes, “Meat has been described as the focus of hospitality, the primordial gift to the stranger.” However, we are obligated to treat with kindness and mercy those beings who we sacrifice for our food. In fact, Scruton points out, these animals would not be alive were it not for people who wanted to eat them.
- ◇ He states, “The life that is sacrificed would not exist but for the sacrifice.” So, he argues, as long as the animals have a good life, meat eating can be morally justified.
- ◇ Scruton is strongly critical of factory farming practices, and he also criticizes those who mindlessly eat meat divorced from the social context that honors the death of the animals. His recommendation is, in keeping with the Judeo-Christian tradition, “not to abandon our meat-eating habits, but to *remoralize* them, by incorporating them into loving human relations, and using them in the true Homeric manner, as instruments of hospitality, conviviality, and peace.”

- ◇ Farmer, meat eater, and author Catherine Friend gives her own recommendations for how to eat meat ethically. First, we must determine what comprises a quality life for a livestock animal. She lists the criteria: “The right kind of food, and plenty of it; fresh water; lots of room to run and exercise; fresh air free from stink and airborne diseases; and the freedom to engage in instinctive behaviors.”
- ◇ She believes that if an animal is given this kind of life, and then killed quickly and painlessly, the eating of their flesh is morally acceptable. Friend argues that meat-eaters can make a difference by ensuring that their meat is humanely and ethically raised. She writes, “Because animals matter, it’s my responsibility, as a meat eater, to ensure that they actually have some quality of life.”

## SUGGESTED READING

Foer, *Eating Animals*.

Friend, *The Compassionate Carnivore*.

Sapontzis, ed., *Food for Thought*.

Singer and Mason, *The Way We Eat*.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 Why do people treat some animals (e.g., their pet dogs and cats) with such love and affection, and treat other animals as objects to be confined, killed, and consumed?
- 2 Is it justifiable to kill or cause harm to another sentient being if not necessary to do so (e.g., for our survival)? If so, what are the reasons?
- 3 Why is vegetarianism far more common among members of Asian religious traditions than members of the monotheistic Abrahamic faiths?

## NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

The definition of death, as we've seen, becomes more difficult to determine the more closely we examine it. But two aspects of death have long been accepted as essential: its universality, and its irreversibility. It's universal, in that all living things die, and it's irreversible, in that once you're dead, there's no coming back to life. Or so we thought. It turns out that there are some intriguing exceptions even to these seemingly hard and fast rules—and they raise questions and hopes about the nature of death, and what, if anything, might lie beyond it.

### IMMORTAL JELLYFISH, FROZEN SKIER

- ◇ *Turritopsis dohrnii* is a tiny, eerily beautiful, Japanese scarlet jellyfish, known as the “immortal jellyfish.” It is the only known being that can revert to the state of infancy after having sexually matured. Put another way—it can start life over again, apparently indefinitely.
- ◇ Scientists are studying these jellyfish to try to find a way to get human stem cells to revert back to an earlier state. They're also interested in another creature known as a *hydra*, the body of which is made almost entirely of stem cells that can endlessly regenerate.
- ◇ There are human cases that call into question the irreversibility of death. Take the remarkable case of Anna Bagenholm, a skier who, as a result of a freak accident, was trapped for around 80 minutes submerged in freezing water.

- ◇ In an article in *The Lancet*, her doctors described how she was brought back from clinical death. The fact that her body temperature had decreased to 56.7 degrees Fahrenheit kept her death from being irreversible. The cold slowed her metabolism, meaning that tissues required less oxygen to survive.

## MARIA

- ◇ Cases like Anna Bagenholm's and that of the immortal jellyfish seem to hold out the possibility that we might be able to extend life as we know it significantly. But other cases from that murky border region suggest, at least to some people, that death is not the end of human experience.
- ◇ In 1984, according to reports, a migrant worker named Maria had a heart attack in Seattle. She was taken to the hospital and placed in the coronary care unit. She was assigned an ICU social worker named Kimberly Clark. While at the hospital, Maria went into cardiac arrest and was resuscitated.
- ◇ Maria later told Kimberly that while the medical team was working on her, she felt herself rise up and look down at her body from the ceiling, so that she could see what the doctors were doing.
- ◇ She then continued her journey until she was outside of the hospital building, where she spotted a tennis shoe on the ledge of the third floor. She provided details about the shoe, including the fact that one of the laces was underneath the heel. Kimberly went up to the third floor and, to her amazement, found the shoe on the ledge, exactly as Maria had described it.

## PAM REYNOLDS

- ◇ In 1991, a woman named Pam Reynolds suffered a brain aneurysm. If the aneurysm burst, it would certainly be fatal. Neurosurgeon Robert Spetzler decided to perform a remarkable surgical procedure whereby he would induce hypothermic cardiac arrest.

- ◇ Pam's body temperature would be lowered to 60 degrees Fahrenheit, which would allow the brain to survive longer without oxygen, and she would be hooked up to a bypass machine where her blood would be cooled down and returned to her body.
- ◇ The procedure began, and soon Pam's heart was stopped and her brain waves went flat. In other words, Pam was clinically dead. An hour later, after the aneurysm had been removed, her temperature was raised, the bypass machine was turned off, and life returned to her body.
- ◇ After she regained consciousness, Pam reportedly said that during the procedure she had felt herself floating over her body, watching the doctors work. She was able to describe, in great detail, a unique bone saw that was used on her skull.



## RESEARCH

- ◇ Dr. Beauregard defines near-death experiences, abbreviated NDE, as “the vivid, realistic, and often deeply life-changing experiences of men, women and children who have been physiologically or psychologically close to death.”
- ◇ Surveys suggest that around 3–5 percent of the population has reported a near-death experience and that in the past 50 years, over 25 million people worldwide have had some kind of NDE. Dr. Pim van Lommel, a cardiologist from the Netherlands, has conducted a study on cardiac arrest patients who were successfully revived. He found that 18 percent had an NDE.
- ◇ The person most responsible for bringing the phenomenon of near-death experiences to public awareness (and even coining the term *near-death experience*) is psychiatrist and philosopher Raymond Moody. In 1975, he published his book *Life After Life*, where he presented over 100 cases of NDEs.
- ◇ Raymond Moody’s student, Dr. Bruce Greyson, is also an NDE researcher, and he has created an NDE scale based on a set of questions about people’s experiences. Greyson and others have found a pattern to NDEs worldwide. They include:
  - Having an out-of-body experience
  - The feeling of being in a tunnel
  - Seeing a light, often experienced in terms of love and acceptance, and often identified with God
  - Encountering deceased relatives and/or religious figures
  - Having a sense of peace and well-being
  - Feeling a reluctance to return to life
  - Remembering one’s life rapidly—a “life review.”



- ◇ Most people also report having been profoundly changed by their experience, often describing themselves as “better people” who are less selfish and materialistic, have more gratitude and joy, and no longer fear death.
- ◇ Not all NDEs are positive, however. Taking data from a variety of studies, it appears that between 9–23 percent of people who had NDEs described them as unpleasant, threatening, or frightening.
- ◇ Noted NDE researcher P. M. H. Atwater divides NDEs into four types:
  - 1 Initial experiences: These are often only darkness or a voice, or nothing at all.
  - 2 Fifteen percent of the adults she studied had hell-like, unpleasant experiences.
  - 3 Forty-seven percent of the adults she studied described heaven-like, pleasant experiences.
  - 4 Eighteen percent of the adults had transcendent experiences. These involve “alternate realities and otherworldly scenes,” often with “revelations of greater truths.”
- ◇ Atwater’s research shows a connection between the type of person who has the NDE and the nature of the NDE itself. Other research shows that people can make positive NDEs more likely through spiritual practice and preparation.

## SKEPTICISM

- ◇ Skeptics argue that there are fully naturalistic explanations for NDEs, and that the phenomena can be reduced entirely to biological and chemical processes in the brain and body. One of the most well-known NDE skeptics is British psychologist Susan Blackmore, who presents the essence of the naturalist position: “NDEs ... are products of a brain and the universe of which it is a part. For there is nothing else.”

- ◇ Scientists who argue that NDEs are created by the brain have a number of theories about how this works. Some believe that NDEs are created by a dying brain that releases endorphins, which are natural pain-relievers that produce a state of well-being.
- ◇ Some scientists point to other substances, such as the powerful psychoactive chemical dimethyltryptamine, which some researchers have proposed is released from the pineal gland. It is also the case that some psychedelic drugs can induce experiences virtually identical with NDEs.
- ◇ Blackmore argues that when the brain is deprived of oxygen, abnormal firing of neurons occurs in the areas of the brain responsible for vision, which produces the effect of a bright central light surrounded by darkness (creating the effect of a tunnel).
- ◇ Neurologist Kevin Nelson, who wrote *The Spiritual Doorway in the Brain*, argues that the tunnel effect is caused by the “constriction of the visual fields due to compromised blood pressure in the eyes, and the ‘bright light’ represents a flow of visual excitation from the brainstem, through visual relay stations, to the visual cortex.”
- ◇ Other scientists have theorized that when the brain is deprived of sensory input as death approaches, it turns on itself, piecing together information it has stored—memories, images—to create experience, often some kind of “life review.” In other words, an NDE is the brain’s experience of itself.
- ◇ An experiment done at the University of Michigan in 2013 produced results that materialists see as evidence for their position. According to journalist Gideon Lichfield, rats in the study had a brain activity spike within 30 seconds of their hearts stopping. In effect, this means that the brain goes into a “final, hyperactive spasm” when it is denied oxygen, which might account for the dramatic and very realistic experiences people believed they had.

- ◇ Skeptics also present evidence that experiences that have the same characteristics as NDEs can be produced by other means. One of the best-known examples of NDE-type experiences occurred in pilots who were subjected to intense G-forces in a giant centrifuge. Dr. James Whinnery conducted that 1978 study, which found that gravitationally induced loss of consciousness due to decreased blood flow, which lasted an average of 12 seconds, resulted in experiences very similar to NDEs.

## THE DEBATE

- ◇ Those who believe that NDEs are more than just brain activity make the point that just because experiences similar to NDEs can be induced in other ways does not mean that NDEs are all illusions. Dr. Bruce Greyson has proposed an alternative hypothesis—that the cessation of the brain’s ordinary functioning that happens as death approaches or during clinical death “might enable the consciousness to tune in to a channel normally blocked or obscured by the chatter.”
- ◇ Those who believe that NDEs are much more than just brain-induced illusions have also used cases like those of Pam Reynolds and the migrant worker named Maria to argue that the patients’ brains could not have just created images of a never-before-seen surgical saw, conversations among doctors doing surgery, or a tennis shoe on a ledge.
- ◇ Skeptics respond by saying that these are anecdotes that have not been backed up by any scientific research. The case of Maria and the tennis shoe, for instance, relies solely on the account of Maria and the social worker who found the shoe. Gideon Lichfield reports, “A few years after being treated, Maria disappeared, and nobody was able to track her down to further confirm her story.”
- ◇ Lichfield also looked more deeply into Pam Reynolds’ remarkable case. He found that Reynolds might have been able to pick up snatches of conversation while she was seemingly unconscious but actually aware of her surroundings, due to something called *anesthesia awareness*.

## CONCLUSIONS

- ◇ In the book she co-authored entitled *The Near-Death Experience*, Jenny Yates points out that if death is understood to be a “one way trip” by definition, then anyone who is resuscitated was not really dead.
- ◇ But if death is defined as the absence of life signs (specifically heart, brain, and lung functions), then people *have* come back from death. It might be possible that consciousness can separate from the body, but stories of NDEs don’t provide proof one way or the other.
- ◇ If it could actually be established that consciousness can exist separately and independently from the body and brain, though, it would mean that the disintegration of our bodies and brains does not mean the end of us. So research into near-death experiences could have profound implications for how we understand what kinds of beings we are and what lies beyond death.

## SUGGESTED READING

Bailey and Yates, *The Near Death Experience*.

Holden, Greyson, and James, *The Handbook of Near Death Experiences*.

Ring, *Heading Toward Omega*.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 What does the commonality among many people’s near-death experiences tell us about the truth of their reports?
- 2 How can we determine if near-death experiences are evidence that some part of the individual survives death or if they are just the activity of the dying brain?

# THE PURSUIT OF IMMORTALITY

Much of this course has been a process of thinking through the many ways that the knowledge of our own inevitable death, and the death of our loved ones, impacts our lives. We have also considered the possibility that there may be some kind of ongoing existence waiting for us after death. In this lecture, we're going to explore just a few of the many methods that people have tried for extending this life so that we don't need to die at all—including ongoing research that has yielded some tantalizing results.

## CHINESE IDEAS

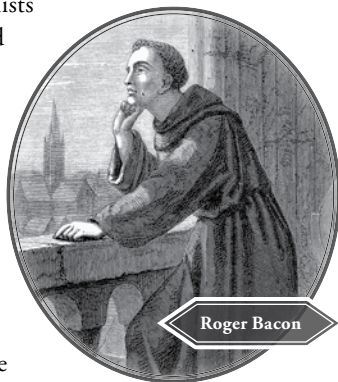
- ◇ Chinese culture has also long been captivated with the idea of extending life or of attaining immortality. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.E., the first emperor of China, Qin Shihuang, was so obsessed with achieving immortality that he sent expeditions to find the secret to it. Ancient stories told of an island called Penglai, where immortals resided.
- ◇ His expeditions found no such island—so his court alchemists searched instead for a compound that would give him the eternal life he sought. They finally concocted a medicine made of mercury for the emperor to ingest, which supposedly killed him.
- ◇ Why might the yearning for earthly, bodily longevity have been a prominent feature of Chinese thought? Here's one possibility: Neither the Confucian nor Daoist texts of the classical period had any emphasis on the afterlife. The focus was on living well in this world.

- ◇ Longevity is such an important value for the Chinese that it is personified. In the popular Chinese imagination, he is featured in a group of three deities, also seen as celestial stars, that are often seen together—Fu Xing (the god of prosperity, flourishing, well-being, good fortune), Lu Xing (the god of status, wealth) and Shou Xing (the god of longevity).
- ◇ Certain forms of Chinese Daoism featured the aspiration for immortality more prominently than just about any other religious traditions in world history. The *Daode Jing*, a text attributed to Laozi, contains the notion that those who are able to live in accordance with the Dao will live long lives.
- ◇ Daoist texts describe two main kinds of immortals—terrestrial immortals, who dwell somewhere on earth, and celestial immortals, who reside in the heavens. In addition, there was a third place immortals can reside: inside the human body itself. As long as these beings dwell within the body, one will stay alive. If you can prevent the immortals from leaving, you can avoid death.
- ◇ One of the important early Daoist masters who focused on the pursuit of immortality is Ge Hong, who lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E. He wrote the *Bao Puzi*, the “*Man Who Embraces Simplicity*.” In this text, he aimed to convince people that immortals exist and that immortality is attainable and is a worthy pursuit for a gentleman.
- ◇ Ge Hong argued that immortality is connected with morality. Ge Hong’s recommended methods for the attainment of immortality are reflected in many subsequent Daoist texts and practices.
- ◇ There are two forms of alchemy found in the Daoist traditions: outer alchemy, which refers to the creation and ingestion of elixirs, and inner alchemy, which involves practices such as breath circulation and forms of meditation.

## OTHER PARTS OF THE WORLD

- ◇ The quest for immortality was pursued in other parts of the world with as much energy as in China. Alchemy, for example, was practiced during the medieval period in the Middle East and later throughout Europe.

- ◇ The Muslims of the great Islamic Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates developed laboratory-based, empirical approaches. Alchemy in Latin Europe, which generally began in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, was originally based on translations of the work of the Arab alchemists.
- ◇ For many European alchemists, their most important work—their “magnum opus”—was to find the philosopher’s stone (*lapis philosophorum*), a substance that would turn base metals into gold and also bring about rejuvenation, the curing of diseases, longevity or immortality to human beings.
- ◇ One of the most famous European alchemists was the 13<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and Franciscan friar Roger Bacon. He argued for the use of experimental methods in the pursuit of knowledge, making him one of the forerunners of the scientific method in the West.
- ◇ Later, in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Sir Isaac Newton devoted significant amounts of time to alchemical studies, believing that the ultimate goal was the discovery of the philosopher’s stone.
- ◇ With the advances of the scientific revolution, however, alchemy fell into disfavor—and by the 18<sup>th</sup> century, scientists were labeling alchemists “frauds” and seeking to sharply distinguish between alchemy and “true science.”



Roger Bacon

## MODERN PURSUITS

- ◇ Longer life or immortality are no less alluring in our day than they were in ancient times, and the rich and powerful now play a prominent role in the quest to attain them. Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook and Sergey Brin of Google, along with a few others, created the Breakthrough Prize for Life Sciences with those goals in mind. At \$3 million, this prize, the largest in all of science, goes to those whose work contributes to extending human life.

- ◇ Google co-founder Larry Page founded the California Life Company—Calico—which focuses on slowing the aging process and extending lifespan. Larry Ellison of Oracle has proclaimed his desire for immortality and given hundreds of millions of dollars to anti-aging research.
- ◇ The average human lifespan has increased significantly over the centuries as diets, medicine, and living conditions have improved. In 1900, the average life expectancy worldwide was 31. Now, it's 71. Why can't it keep growing?
- ◇ Those who doubt that it can go much higher point out that the dramatic increase since 1900 is due to the fact that we have learned to deal with many *external* causes of death, like infectious diseases and accidents. Now, as we see increasing numbers of people dying from chronic diseases, we may be seeing the natural limits of the human lifespan.

## THEORIES OF AGING

- ◇ There are a number of theories about why we age, and they are not mutually exclusive. Each seems to explain in some way the human aging process. Each can be connected with an approach to longevity that is derived from it.
- ◇ The first theory comes from evolutionary biology. As the Daoists intuited, there is a link between sex and death. On one level, we are simply vehicles for our genes.
  - The sex drive, the powerful drive to have children, and the instinct to protect them even at the expense of our own lives testify to the power of the reproductive drive and the importance of passing on our genetic endowment.
  - Nevertheless, some species reproduce more quickly than others, and even within a single species, some animals wait until later in their lives to breed.



- Geneticist Michael Rose noticed this variation in fruit flies, and used selective breeding to artificially select for flies that bred later in their life cycle. Within 12 generations, he had doubled the lifespan of the fruit flies, a remarkable achievement.
- ◇ The second theory of aging focuses on cell death. The death of our cells ultimately leads to systems malfunctioning and whole body death.
- Cells in our body can only divide so many times. So what determines how many times a cell can divide?
  - Our chromosomes, which carry our DNA, come with little tips at the ends, called *telomeres*, which are repetitive DNA sequences. When our chromosomes replicate themselves, the telomeres prevent essential DNA from being lost, and decrease the probability of mutations occurring.
  - Over time, with each division, the telomere grows smaller. Once it is gone, the cell can no longer divide, and it ultimately dies. The longer the telomere, the more times the cell can replicate. Scientists have developed the enzyme *telomerase* to lengthen telomeres and slow the aging process. So far, though, this comes with a downside: an increased risk of cancer.
- ◇ The third theory of aging can be called the *accumulated damage theory*.
- Damage-based theories posit that aging occurs because of interactions with the environment and/or damage from chemical reactions in the body. We repair most of this damage, but not all.
  - Within our cells, energy that our body needs to function is produced in the mitochondria, but that same process also produces *free radicals*. The free radicals are charged in such a way that they seek out things to bind to, including DNA. When they attack DNA, mutations can result.

- Scientists have discovered an enzyme that binds to the free radicals, rendering them harmless. When they manipulated the genes of flies to increase production of that enzyme, the flies lived 30 percent longer.
  - Another way to fight free radicals is through increasing our intake of antioxidants, which inhibit their activity. Antioxidants can be found in fruits and vegetables, particularly vitamins C and E, and they are put in supplements.
- ◇ The fourth theory of aging focuses on the role of genes in regulating the aging process.
- Studies have shown that people with parents who live long lives have a higher probability of living longer themselves, and that identical twins (who possess the same genes) have lifespans that are closer to each other than are the lifespans of other kinds of siblings.
  - Dr. Sandra Hunter, who researches the effect of aging on neuromuscular function, explains that “our genetic encoding is responsible for up to 30 percent of our lifespan.” This understanding of aging has led efforts to increase longevity by finding the genes that regulate aging and manipulating them.

## OTHER AVENUES

- ◇ Scientists are also exploring a number of other promising avenues in the pursuit of longevity. One such avenue is research into stem cells.
- When a human embryo first forms, it consists of a few hundred stem cells together in a *blastula*. The stem cells initially are not differentiated or specialized; only later do they transform themselves, in amazing fashion, into the various tissues and organs of our bodies.

- Scientists are exploring ways to use undifferentiated stem cells to produce an endless supply of “replacement organs” for use when our own organs wear out. This notion has raised several important ethical concerns, but writer Gregg Easterbrook calls stem cells “magical objects” that are “the philosopher’s stone of biology.”
- ◇ Yet another modern approach to life-extension that was also previously pursued by the Daoists is caloric restriction. Mice that are put on a diet with 40 percent fewer calories have been shown to live over 30 percent longer than other mice, and are also healthier and have better physical control.
- ◇ Other research is exploring how the decline in our bodies’ production of certain hormones as we age affects longevity.
  - Human growth hormone (HGH) stimulates growth and cell regeneration. HGH is produced by the pituitary gland, but in 1985, it was synthesized and approved by the FDA to treat a variety of conditions, including disorders affecting human development.
  - Some believe that taking synthetic HGH will keep people younger and fitter for longer periods, although this anti-aging use is not FDA-approved.
- ◇ Hoping that they will benefit someday from science’s efforts to find a cure for aging, some 270 people in the United States (as of this writing) have had their bodies cryonically preserved—that is, frozen. But whether or not their memories or senses of self will remain when their brains are thawed is an open question.

## SUGGESTED READING

Gollner, *The Book of Immortality*.

Klein, ed., *The Scientific Conquest of Death*.

Olshansky and Carnes, *The Quest for Immortality*.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 Have we approached the limit on how long humans can live, or will advancements in science and technology allow humans to live radically extended lifespans?
- 2 What are the different theories of why people (and all living beings) age, and how are these different theories connected with different approaches to life extension?

# THE VALUE OF DEATH

In the television series *Game of Thrones*, when master swordsman Syrio Forel is teaching his pupil Arya the art of swordfighting, he tells her, “There is only one thing we say to Death: ‘Not today.’” All of us, and all forms of life, possess a drive to keep on living. It’s both a biological and a psychological imperative. And as we have seen, the yearning to extend life indefinitely has been in the human heart since ancient days. In this final lecture, we’re going to take a closer look at the idea of immortality, and what it really offers.

## BOREDOM

- ◇ For all its appeal, the first problem we encounter as we contemplate immortality is the possibility that it would be unbearably boring. Philosopher Bernard Williams made this case in an article entitled “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality.” The article begins with an analysis of a play about a woman, Elina Makropulos, who is given an elixir of life by her father and consequently becomes immortal. She remains the age of 42, and at the time of the play, she has lived for 300 years. In order to maintain her immortal state, she must continue to take the elixir.
- ◇ Ultimately, Elina loses a sense of purpose. As Williams describes it, “Her unending life has come to a state of boredom, indifference and coldness. ... She refuses to take the elixir again; she dies.”
- ◇ Elina’s sad fate does not, however, mean the problem of boredom can’t be solved. One solution is to imagine that immortality consists not of one endless life but a series of lives, a sequence of rebirths (as in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions), so that a person’s character and interests change periodically.

- ◇ While this might solve the problem of boredom, however, it raises another problem. In order for this to be a solution to the problem of death, it must promise the continuation of *one single being's* life. If one cannot look forward to a future being's experiences as one's own experiences, then it doesn't count as a solution to one's problem of mortality.
- ◇ A second solution to the boredom problem is to envision immortality not as dynamic—that is, involving an ongoing series of experiences—but static, so that one is completely absorbed in a single activity. As we have seen, some philosophers and theologians have proposed that intellectual contemplation and absorption in a vision of God might be such an activity. But this solution presents the same problem as the first: Any being that one can imagine as eternally satisfied by pure contemplation is no longer recognizably that same being.
- ◇ Philosopher John Martin Fischer attacks this problem by asking: “Why suppose that any one single supposedly absorbing activity must be pursued at the expense of all others?” Can't we imagine that a life filled with various activities—learning different languages and musical instruments, traveling, meeting people, eating wonderful meals, and reading great books—could be interesting and enjoyable for centuries? Of course, this combination of activities would have to keep us engaged not just for centuries or millennia, but forever.
- ◇ In order to find out if this would be possible, we must think about the nature of pleasures. Fischer distinguishes between “self-exhausting” pleasures and “repeatable” pleasures. In the case of self-exhausting pleasures, when one experiences them, one tends “not to want to repeat them”—a difficult class or challenging book, for instance.
- ◇ Contrast this with repeatable pleasures. These are pleasures that, even once we enjoy them, we look forward to enjoying again in the future. On this list, Fischer places “the pleasures of sex, of eating fine meals, and drinking fine wines, of listening to beautiful music, of seeing great art, and so forth.”

- ◇ Another way to deal with boredom is to approach life differently. One could argue that boredom is not so much the product of external circumstances as the result of a certain mental state. In Buddhism, restlessness is one of the “five hindrances” to meditation that practitioners learn to overcome.
- ◇ Is just sitting outside on a lovely day in silence boring? For someone who has meditated and can experience great joy and equanimity in mere existence, it might be deeply satisfying.

## SOCIETAL DIFFICULTIES

- ◇ While repeatable pleasures and the right state of mind might make immortality bearable, it also presents other difficulties. If the means existed to make human beings immortal—or even grant extraordinary longevity, say 200 or 400 years—it seems clear that they would either be made available to everyone in short order, or they would only be useable by a select group of people. Both situations would create significant social problems.
- ◇ In the first case, the entire structure of society would be completely undermined. With people living forever or even just living significantly longer lives, the world’s population would explode. The complete unsustainability of resources would quickly lead to widespread conflict and misery.



- ◇ Unfortunately, immortality appears no more promising if made available only to a select group of people. Such a situation would raise the problem of distributive justice, and would create a class divide even more powerful than wealth.

## SOLO IMMORTALITY

- ◇ Imagine that only you were granted immortality. What would it be like to see everyone you ever loved, the friends, spouses, and children that you have over the centuries, die? If the mortals in your life learned about your immortality, what would be the consequences? Simone de Beauvoir grappled with questions such as these in her novel, *All Men are Mortal*.
- ◇ One important angle in the book is how Raymond Fosca, a man born in the 13<sup>th</sup> century who drank a potion and became immortal, relates to Marianne, a woman who, during one portion of his life, is his wife.
- ◇ Marianne makes the point that Fosca can never give himself to her in the way that she gives herself to him. She has but one brief life to give, but Fosca has eternity—so he will have hundreds, thousands of others, and she will fade into nothingness for him.

## THE NARRATIVE PROBLEM

- ◇ A final concern about immortality is expressed powerfully in a beautiful and thought-provoking short story by the author Jorge Luis Borges, entitled “The Immortal.”
- ◇ The story centers on the character Marcus Flaminius Rufus, who is born around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E. He hears of a secret City of the Immortals and sets out to find it.
- ◇ In the midst of an arduous journey, he comes across a group of mute, “naked, gray-skinned, scraggly bearded men” who live in pits and caves in the desert.



One of them takes him to the city he's been seeking, and Flaminus Rufus names him Argos, after the moribund dog of Odysseus in *The Odyssey*.

- ◇ Flaminus Rufus explores the City of the Immortals, finding within it a series of chaotic, confusing galleries, chambers, doors, and labyrinths. After he leaves this monstrous place, Flaminus Rufus returns to the cave-dwellers. He hopes to teach Argos language, although it seems that Argos lives in a "world without memory, without time."
- ◇ At a pivotal moment, Flaminus Rufus discovers that Argos is actually Homer, the author of the *Odyssey*. And the cave-dwellers are, in fact, the immortals. We learn that when Flaminus Rufus first found himself among the cave-dwellers, he was burning with thirst, and so sought out a stream from which he drank. Although he did not know it at the time, he had found the River of Immortality, and by drinking from it, he himself had become immortal.
- ◇ One of the main points of the story is that immortality would rob us of our very selfhood. A narrative depends on a beginning and end. If our lives were endless, we could not maintain a narratively-based concept of ourselves, because our memory capacity is not infinite.
- ◇ The mad city that the immortals have constructed is a material illustration of the grotesque pointlessness of endless existence. Rather than a path leading somewhere, time becomes an endless maze, forever turning back on itself, going nowhere in particular.
- ◇ Once he realizes his situation, Flaminus Rufus's only hope is to undo the curse of immortality. He reasons, "There exists a river whose waters grant immortality; in some region there must be another river whose waters remove it." Finding that becomes his next quest.

## MODES OF IMMORTALITY

- ◇ Something like immortality is still attainable for all of us. This section draws on the work of psychiatrist and author Robert Jay Lifton, although it both diverges from and adds to it in certain ways. We can see that

there are various “modes of immortality,” or modes of “connection and continuity.”

- ◇ First, if you believe in it, there is the possibility of personal immortality in several different theological or metaphysical modes—from physical resurrection, to spiritual survival as a disembodied soul, to reincarnation or a continuing series of linked lives.
- ◇ There is the possibility of *biological* or *familial immortality*. In significant ways, we live on through our children and descendants.
- ◇ A third category is *creative immortality*, in which we survive through our work.
- ◇ There is also the category of what can be called *human-relatedness*, the influence we have on others. This form of immortality exists in the effects we have on individual lives—of family, friends, students, and members of our community.
- ◇ A fifth category is our participation in the natural world. Human beings can take comfort in the fact that our lives and deaths are intimately bound up in the cyclical processes of nature.
- ◇ The sixth and final category is immortality through oneness or non-duality with all existence—an idea expressed powerfully in the Upanishads and by Zhuangzi, and seen in many mystics. Such a state is described in almost every religious tradition, and can be realized through such practices as meditation, psychoactive substances, drumming, and dance, among others.

## THE MEANING

- ◇ From the outset of our journey together, we have repeatedly encountered one question, directly and indirectly: “If we’re just here for a short time and then die, what does it all mean?”

- ◇ Despite all of the psychological, existential, and philosophical challenges death confronts us with, it might be the case that *death* is what makes a meaningful life possible. Knowing what little time we have makes every day precious, and each moment sacred.
- ◇ Recognizing that we can pass on something enduring of ourselves to those who will follow us can give us a powerful sense of purpose, even if the brevity of our existence tinges our days with wistfulness.
- ◇ Death is paradoxical in many ways. Death is bad, yet not bad, for the person who dies. It is both important to hold on, and essential to let go. There are times that ending a life is justified, yet one of the worst things anyone can do is end a life. We are justified in fearing death, and yet we should recognize that death is what gives our life meaning.
- ◇ Death is one of our most powerful teachers. Hopefully, the wisdom we gain from reflecting on the impermanence all around us, and from exploring the ideas of those who have faced and thought deeply about death and loss, will help us to die better deaths when the time comes—and to live wiser, richer, more fulfilling lives while we have them.



## SUGGESTED READING

Borges, “The Immortal.”

Fischer, “Why Immortality is Not So Bad.”

Kass, “L’Chaim and Its Limits.”

Williams, “The Makropolis Case.”

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 What are the problems, both individual and social, that would result from human beings achieving radically extended lifespans or immortality?
- 2 Would you want to live 500 years if given the option? Would you want to live forever?
- 3 Would an endless number of years to live inevitably result in boredom?
- 4 If death is the end of us, does it make life meaningless? Or is it the reason that life is meaningful?

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